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"BREEZIE LANGTON"

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BY

HAWLEY SMART,

AUTHOR OF

'BREEZIE LANGTON,' 'BITTER IS THE RIND,'

ETC.

'In yesterday's reach and to-morrow's,
Out of sight though they lie of to-day,
There have been and there yet shall be sorrows
That smite not and bite not in play.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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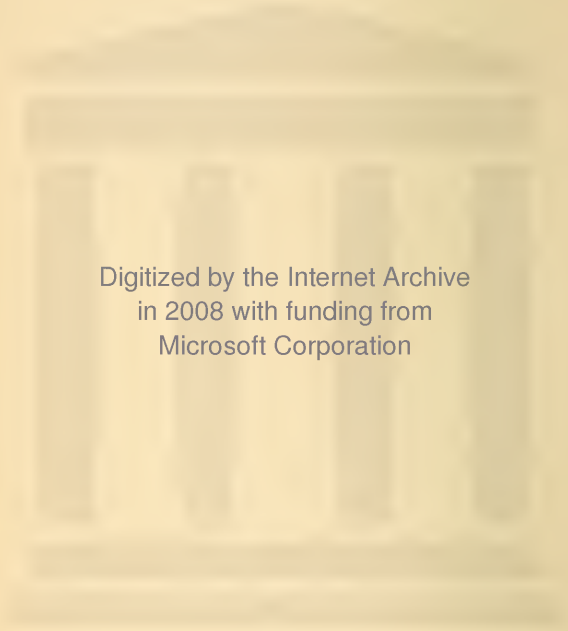
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CECILE.

CHAPTER I.

'CHILDERLEY.'

A PLEASANT smoking-room is that of Childerley, with its squab, easy lounging chairs and comfortable sofas. Proof engravings decorate the walls, and that old oak cabinet in the background is filled with specimens of modern vertu in the shape of Partegas, Cabanas, &c., of rare growth, antique brand, and for which marvellous prices have been given. Articles of vertu, forsooth! Yea, verily. Am I not writing of modern idolaters, and is not this a temple consecrated

to the goddess Nicotine? Many have worshipped at her shrine in this room; numberless are the pleasant stories, merry jests, quips and repartees that due sacrifice to her rites has here evoked. The centre table is decorated with a lamp, various cut glass decanters, and several bottles of potash or seltzer. The candles still burn on the adjacent whist table, where the *débris* of a rubber, in the shape of a confused heap of cards and mother-of-pearl markers, lie scattered.

'All nonsense, I tell you,' exclaims a stout, florid man, with his back to the fire, and who, with his legs a little apart, has assumed a position on the hearth-rug that inevitably betokens haranguing the audience. 'I tell you our morality is all cant, our boasted civilisation a sham. The Romans were infinitely our superiors on the latter point. But to return to what we were talking about, I say, and you'll have to admit it ere long, that foundling hospitals

are becoming a growing necessity in London. You shut your eyes to one of the great vices of the days we live in. You write whimpering letters to the "Times" about the slaughter of pigeons. You ignore that the days of Herod are revived. Foundling hospitals are a great premium on vice, say our moralists. Good! we allow the organisation of a grand system of child murder to obviate their necessity. It is better that murder should conceal shame than our propriety should be shocked. I've nothing to say about it. I have to talk or write about these things professionally, and say my say there. Only do not talk any more about the advance of morals or civilisation,' and Egerton Slane shrugged his shoulders.

'Can't agree with you, Slane. I'll admit child murder has been lamentably on the increase, and the late disclosures were shocking in the extreme. But nobody can persuade me that the march of civilisation is not progressing with rapid strides.'

The speaker is Sir Hervey Mallandaine, the owner of Childerley, a man a little the wrong side of forty, and who has represented his county in Parliament for some years.

'I don't allow it,' retorted Slane (he never did allow anything, and was invariably in opposition to his companion of the hour). 'Civilisation advances, bosh! The ancients had all we have, exceeded us in virtue, eclipsed us in vice. What can you claim for us? I give you the electric telegraph and railways; the latter the ancients no doubt would have had, but they foresaw the inconvenience that would arise from them, a fact we are slowly opening our eyes to. It's no use going anywhere now, you can't see anything when you get there for the crowd. The Derby is a dream of the past, a thing to read of in the papers, not see. Telegraphs the same. No use attempting to relate a story or communicate a bit of news. Your auditor got it by telegraph two hours

ago. I always in these days wait to be talked to.'

A roar of laughter greeted this last statement, for the speaker was a notorious offender in respect of what Madame de Stael called 'that disease de monologue,' albeit, if history tells truth, rather subject to it herself. Egerton Slane is an influential journalist, has written two or three successful novels, has essayed as a dramatist, and all London has been to laugh at the sparkling comedies he has given them; but in private life talk he must, and the enunciation of any view of a subject necessitates his looking at it from a diametrically opposite point, although he might have written a clever leader in direct contradiction to his own argument within the week. Man must dine is an axiom. That man must talk was equally so as regards Egerton Slane. For the remainder, he promulgated in his conversation the most cynical and eccentric views on moral and social polity, was extremely

popular, and secretly, after the manner of most cynics, did many a kind and generous turn to his less fortunate brothers and sisters of the literary guild.

'You all laugh,' he exclaimed with a smile. 'What are you grinning at, Merriott? Do you flatter yourself I'm going to let you off; you who belong to that obsolete institution, the British Cavalry; or Roland Dance there, who is connected with that worn out bureaucracy the War-office?'

'Don't mind me, Egerton,' rejoined Dance, a slight, dark man, who was lounging on the sofa in full enjoyment of his evening cigar.

'Well, I'll leave you alone for a few minutes, just while I explain to Merriott why I call his the obsolete branch of the service. Your swords are no sharper, your horses no better than those of the Mamelukes, and they did little with the French squares in Egypt. Men and horses can't be improved in the same ratio as the implements for their destruction. You'll grant that Alec, eh?'

'Grant anything,' laughed the interrogated, a tall good-looking captain of Lancers. 'I'm not going to argue with you. You're a little too good for me, although you did trump my best spade in that last rubber. I suppose we shall ride straight when we're wanted; we generally have, and I don't think you'll have to complain next time we're called on.'

'Confound him; he's changed front,' laughed Slane. 'No, my boy; I'll not bring you all on my back by arguing that the Anglo-Saxon blood is deteriorating in its indifference to danger. I'll——'

'Stóp!' exclaimed Sir Hervey. 'Even you have made the admission that civilisation has advanced.'

'How so?'

'Why, you admit science has made vast improvements regarding artillery, musketry, iron clads, &c.'

'Hah! the destruction of life has been comparatively simple from earliest history, if

that is all your researches have done for you.'

'Halloa! what about that cock pheasant? You missed to-day both barrels, Egerton,' cried Dance.

'Good night—come away Sir Hervey; the rising generation is getting irreverent; although I'm prepared to prove on mathematical principles that pheasant's escape was his fault not mine. He didn't fly as wind and instinct should have dictated.'

'They don't sometimes,' observed the Lancer.

'Good night,' retorted Slane; 'that Cabana you're now lighting will avenge me amply. How ill you'll be to-morrow from your debauch on nicotine.'

'Rum fish, Egerton,' observed Dance as the door closed. 'Pleasant to meet though anywhere, there's *vim* in his paradoxical converse which is something in these days. It's a treat to hear a man enunciate new views even when you think them erroneous.'

'Yes. Good day we had, hadn't we? Been a pleasant fortnight altogether. I'm sorry it's over.'

'I should rather think you were, considering the awful running you've been making with Lydia Remington all the time. By Jove, Alec, I begin to think you're in earnest for once.'

'Hum, that's just where it is—that's the mischief of it.'

'Why, how so?' enquired Dance. 'She seems inclined to listen attentively enough to your pretty speeches. I don't see you have much cause to complain.'

Alec Merriott flipped the ash off his cigar and paused a few seconds ere he replied. 'Yes,' he said, at length, 'that's where it is. I *am* in earnest, most tremendously in earnest, and I'm blessed if I can make out whether she is. I've flirted with a good many and held my own pretty fairly, but that's just where the difference lies. I never

meant it before, and now I do, I suppose I shall get the worst of it.'

'Why the deuce should you?' enquired the other.

'You see, Ro, she's awfully clever; I don't think I am, eh?' and the speaker gazed rather curiously into his companion's face.

'How do you mean; I don't understand?'

'Well, I play a decent rubber; don't trump my partner's best spade, as Egerton Slane did to-night you know. I can shoot tolerably straight, and hold my own when hounds are running. Those ought to be points in a man's favour.'

'Of course, I know all that; what are you counting out your accomplishments for—what's that got to do with it? She's not likely to object to you for not being a muff, is she?'

'No; but you see Lydia goes in for intellect, and all that sort of thing. Now that's not my line; I'm not a reading fellow. By

Jove, she's let me in for a devil of a mess already. She's made me promise to play in their amateur theatricals. I told her I could never learn it.'

'And what did she say to that?'

'"Oh, nonsense, Captain Merriott, you have plenty of ability if you choose to exercise it. All you men are so lazy now-a-days. You will go through any amount of physical exertion in pursuit of field sports, but you won't take the trouble to let us see the best of you." It's an awful go; she will insist upon it I'm clever.'

'Well, Alec, you'll have no difficulty about disabusing her on that point.'

'Don't chaff,' said Merriott, as he emitted a wreath of blue vapour from beneath his moustache. 'I tell you it is serious. I'm awfully hard hit, and she will insist upon it I can distinguish myself intellectually if I will but try. Absurd idea of a girl in these days caring about that. When they do, they generally are strong-minded, and want

to go in on their own account in that way. But that's not Lydia, is it?'

'No; Miss Remington is as nice, graceful, and ladylike a girl as one ever meets with. I should never have suspected her of "ambitioning" that her lover should make his mark in that wise.'

'No, nor anyone else; and she puts it all so prettily, there's no refusing her. If she told me to write a novel, I'm blessed if I don't think I should be fool enough to try—and what a go that would be.'

'Well, Alec, we'll trust you won't be tried so far.'

'Oh, I can't say; one never knows what women will induce us to do when we've once lost our heads about them;' and Merriott puffed moodily at his cigar.

'Another safeguard for you there, my boy; you would probably get no one to publish your book, or read it if published.'

'Don't be a fool; it would be easy enough to get it published if one paid for it; and if

I was ass enough to commit myself to the first part of the performance, you don't suppose I should stick at the second. As for reading it, wouldn't all your dear friends rush to see what an exhibition you had made of yourself? Trust 'em, Ro, I should have readers.'

'Did you ever tell her about your winning the steeplechase at Holmeswood, or any of your deeds with bat and ball in the cricket-field? Women rather respect a man who has made his mark in athletics.'

'Not my form; I'm not good at bragging —other way on. I rather like shooting a fellow for a quiet fifty who's talking big in that way.'

'Quite right, *mon enfant*; but you had better play out your trumps when conversing with the other sex. We rather see through each other, and so do they; but a good many women take a man on his own valuation, and only find out their mistake afterwards.'

'You don't understand Lydia,' replied Merriott, curtly. 'Don't think you quite comprehend Pauline St. Leger either.'

'Never mind my affairs,' said Dance, a little sharply. 'We are old allies, Alec, but that question is not before the house. When I want your advice there, I'll ask it.'

'You'll never ask it, never mind why. But look here, Ro, you've had a turn at amateur theatricals, haven't you?'

Dance nodded assent.

'Tell us a little about it. Much trouble getting the words off, eh?'

'No; that's all easy enough. You'll pull through without any trouble. Always recollect there are only about two people in an average amateur troop who know anything about the business, and never above two more into whom it is possible to instil any idea of what they ought to do. The audience have all seen it fifty times better done by professionals, and are much more amused at your making a mess of it than otherwise. You can't go wrong if you don't lose your nerve.'

'Ah! it is nervous work, then, is it?'

'Not a bit; but there's a complaint called stage-fright which sometimes bowls over both amateurs and professionals.'

'The devil there is. Wish I'd kept out of it—certain to come to grief. I say, you must give us a lift, Ro.'

'Of course I'll coach you. How did you get on with your reading of your part to-day with Miss Remington?'

'Not very well. I could have come out strong in that love scene—felt as if I didn't want any teaching; but she wouldn't give me a chance. All her vivacity left her there, and she gabbled through it, though I told her it was the best part of the play, where I was so anxious, for her sake, not to fail, and implored her to go over it carefully.'

'Ah!' said Dance, laughing, 'you'll do. You have made no mistake in joining the company; it will do you good service, and you're not the man to neglect your opportunities.'

'Don't understand,' replied Merriott, gravely.

'Not in the least, of course. Plenty of acting in you, Alec,' rejoined the other. 'Your innocent face of vacuous incomprehension is a sublime study for the spectator.'

'Well,' laughed the other, 'it was the idea of doing that scene made me give in and consent to join the fandango.'

'Ah, well, we shall see what comes of it. Time for bed now;' and Dance threw the end of his cigar into the grate. 'Good night.'

Alec Merriott paced his chamber for some few minutes ere he proceeded to undress. A tall, fair, good-looking man, to whom life had been sunny so far. He had danced, shot, hunted, flirted, &c., through the last half-score years of his life, and no woman had cost him much thought as yet. But now he felt he had come to a crisis in his career. Lydia Remington's bright eyes, soft voice, and piquant ways had been making wild work

with his heart of late. He is fain to own himself in earnest this time. She is a good match for any man; a gay, lively girl, the only daughter of a respectable gentleman who has made many ingots in the City. A very family of idolaters—the father worships money, the mother fashion, and the daughter professes to adore intellect. Nothing much to despond about in all this. But Alec Merriott is by no means the only devotee who burns incense at Miss Remington's altar; and when a man is really in love he is vaguely conscious that he does not show to the best advantage. He is apt to overrate the capabilities of his rivals, and to invest them with qualities they do not really possess. Of course, he cannot exactly perceive what the deuce women can see to like in them, but he feels horribly apprehensive that the one woman whose opinion is alone of consequence in his eyes will be perverted enough to view them favourably. Then

Alec knew that Remington père contemplated every one in an aurated light, and he was aware that his gilding was not of that massive description likely to find much favour in Mr. Remington's sight. With regard to Mrs. Remington, he stood upon much more favourable ground. His name was known at Hurlingham; he was a cricketer of mark at Lord's; a member of some of the best West-end clubs; a welcome guest in Belgravia, and a recognised man in 'the shires;' naturally, the maternal Remington thought highly of him. But, after all, how he stood with Lydia was the thing perhaps of most importance. As he himself expressed it, 'That's where it is—is she in earnest?' They have got on very well so far; but Miss Remington has only just developed this devotion to intellect—a side of her character as yet unsuspected. Alec has found himself rather in difficulties of late, and feels conscious of being utterly ignorant of more than one writer with

whom his enchantress has taken it for granted he is well acquainted.

'Devil of a go,' he muttered, 'her taking up this theatrical freak—that is to say, entrapping me into it. Besides, she won't go into the proper spirit of the rehearsals; said she would put me in the way of it, and then shirks what I call the only interesting scene in the play. Make a fool of myself, I suppose,' he continued, as he leisurely undressed. 'Well, a good many of us do that, and for not half such pretty girls as Lydia. Wish I knew whether she does really care a bit about me though;' and he kicked his slippers off viciously. 'Halloa, into the bath, by Jingo;' and having rescued his slipper, Merriott sought his pillow.

CHAPTER II.

'MON DROIT NATUREL.'

A long struggle with the grey morning mist, and then a bright January sun breaks over Childerley, lighting up the grand old elm avenue, and spreading his attenuated rays far and wide over the great expanse of broken park land that surrounds the old Elizabethan house; shimmering over the placid waters of the lake, and gilding the horns of the deer as they busily strip the bark from the branches cut down for them. The hares are washing their faces, and nibbling such grass as their researches may discover. A few cock pheasants loiter in the sun, and in the far distance you may discern an under-keeper steadying a young retriever to ground game.

A fair estate is Childerley, and has been the property of the Mallandaines time out of mind. They are old settlers in these parts, and have lived amongst their people the last three hundred years or so. If no Mallandaine has achieved great distinction, yet also never a Mallandaine of them all has come to irrevocable, infinite grief. They have kept clear of the iniquities of the turf and the dice-box. A race that have lived soberly, married discreetly, spent much of their time on their estate, and done their duty honestly and conscientiously to their county and dependants.

Sir Hervey, the present representative of the family, had followed in the steps of his predecessors. He was well-known as an excellent man of business, and had for some years represented his county in Parliament. In one thing only, for a time, had the baronet, in the opinion of his neighbours, not recognised his duty as a Mallandaine: he had not married. Numberless were

the mothers, numerous the daughters, who would have fain rectified this error on Sir Hervey's part. A baronet with a good property is worth looking after as times go on the matrimonial exchange. There were female Mallandaines who preached the necessity of the marriage contract to him, and offered to produce an infinity of eligible young ladies for his selection, with an ardour that only elderly females with the honour of their house at heart can achieve. All in vain, useless, hopeless. Sir Hervey was impervious to assault; attack by storm or approaches more insidious were alike unavailing. The denunciations and lamentations of his family were equally unsuccessful. 'Time enough; I'm very well as I am,' was all that the most vituperative appeal of his most acidulated maiden aunt had been able to wring from him. One of those dire maidens who mingle much unpleasantness with their views regarding their wealthy relations.

You can imagine the shriek, the uplifting of hands, and upraising of eyebrows that took place in the Mallandaine world when Sir Hervey, without condescending to give the slightest notice to his relations, in his forty-first year married Cecile Bertrand, a girl barely eighteen, the daughter of the rector of his parish. Do we not all know what a scream reverberates through our social circle, when we leave the tramway that has been laid down for us? Oh, my brother, when your friends have predestined you for the woolsack, and you lapse into the abomination of writing burlesques, what matter that you are good at the production of burlesques? When you abandon your profession to follow your bent, how you are wept and wailed over. What ominous predictions are enunciated with regard to your backslidings. Slowest to recognise your success are those akin to you. They harp upon your wondrous good fortune, and refuse to acknowledge that you may

have worked hard for such laurels as may be your guerdon.

Sir Hervey was duly moaned over by his relations, in strict accordance with the recognised law. His innocent young wife was stigmatised as a scheming, designing woman by those elderly and affectionate relatives; but they made their moan among themselves, for the baronet, though easy and even-tempered in the extreme, had long made manifest to their comprehension that he chose his own road through life, and brooked little interference with his choice. He took his young wife abroad, and Cecile was as delighted as a child with her foreign tour, prolonged as it was for many months. She was not only young, but even young for her age. She had seen so little of this world's pomps and vanities. The bloom of girlhood was still on her. One ball at the country town, at which she had been too shy to talk much to her partners, and had been about equally frightened and pleased; such

her sole taste of the pleasures of society. Pleasures indeed! pains and penalties we dub them as we grow older, and find how lightly the gilt overlays the ginger-bread. When Sir Hervey took her to town next season, the contempt of the women for the quiet, modest, unassuming, timid country-girl, with neither manner nor *savoir vivre*, was unbounded. When the men, attracted by her beauty, artlessness, and naïveté, flocked around her, the indignation of her sisters knew no bounds. The little country-girl, if she lacked that questionable advantage, fashionable training, had a mind and had a soul—two superfluities not much recognised in fashionable society. The *ingénue* became the rage. 'It's like drinking pure water again only to talk to her. Gad, Sir, it makes one feel young once more,' said Lord Rathfarlin, whose libertinage and epigrams were of continental celebrity. She was a success of the season. Nature had given her grace, beauty, and wit. Society gave her

the self-possession which enabled her to use her weapons. But her charm, after all, was her freshness and originality. Easily pleased, she made no scruple of showing that she was so. Two seasons now had she shone on the London world, and was as yet untainted with its cynicism and wickedness, even though she mixed freely therein. The down was as yet upon the peach. The most roué lips in all town would have stumbled at fulsome compliment, or the relation of dubious anecdote, to Lady Mallandaine.

One child only had so far blessed Sir Hervey's marriage, a little boy now verging on four years old, and around whom the tendrils of the mother's heart were entwined with all the ardour of her young, passionate, loving nature. The baronet loved the child much also in his quiet, sedate fashion; but what Briton involved in politics is impulsive in his love for anything? The exhibition of domestic affections seems to the outer world incompatible with wielding the

destinies of nations. We are a little apt to couple power with moroseness, and the educated working people of England deem the genial politician wanting in stability of purpose. They are not altogether wrong; a jest or a gibe has deluged the world with blood many times.

The bright January sun comes glinting in at the low window at the bottom of the servants' staircase. Leaning over the sill, and criticising the landscape leisurely, is a somewhat bullet-headed, close cropped, clean-shaven individual. A slight wiry man with a keen grey eye, and one of those full, not coarse, lipped mouths that always seem to tremble with the suppression of their own roguery. The neatly-folded clothes on the chair by his side, the can of hot water, and the well-polished boots resting by his feet, proclaim him valet to one of the sleepers above. This is Mr. Joseph—more familiarly known as Joe Butters—Alec Merriott's valet, stud groom, and general factotum.

'Yes,' he murmured at length, 'it's a very fair park; a very tidy crib to put up at as cribs go, is Childerley. The rations is liberal; and the ale—well, yes, the ale's above the average. Shootin—well, the Capten had no cause to find fault with his stands nor hacks yesterday. Think he's trained a leetle off though lately; I've seen him straighter—more dead on 'em. Maybe Sir Hervey's claret don't quite suit him; maybe 'tis Mister Dance keeps him up too late o' nights. He's the very devil to sit up is Mister Dance. This form won't do for Hurlingham; we shall loose no end of sovs there, if we don't improve upon it. My eye, it takes pretty straight shooting to get home there.' And musing over the pigeon shooting of last season, where he had invariably loaded for his master, Mr. Butters once more languidly contemplated the prospect. 'Damme, makes me sick to look at 'em,' he suddenly exclaimed, jerking his whole body round, and turning his back

on the offending object. 'Stables — but wot's the use of stables with nothing but some heavy coach horses in 'em; nothing but my lady's ponies fit to look a second time at. Wot's the use of a man as calls hisself a coachman, and don't know what won the Goodwood Cup; and, cuss his impudence, tried to persuade me he had cured a crib biter. Childerley's all very well, but the stables and all connected with 'em, bar my lady's ponies, are—well, provincial ain't a bit strong enough language to use concerning 'em—simply the meanest turn out ever I see.'

A light step behind him, and Mr. Butters turns to encounter one of the archest faces and trimmest figures a man would be likely to meet with in a month's walking tour.

'*Bon jour*, Monsieur Bouttare; you admire de view very mooch dis *beau matin*,' observes Mdlle. Suzanne (Miss Remington's French maid), as she pauses, hot water in hand, at the foot of the staircase. With her

glossy black hair, arch dark eyes, somewhat *retroussé* nose, and lithe pliant figure, Mdlle. Suzanne looked very pretty as she stood one foot on the stair and one hand on the banister, and gave greeting to the slightly acidulated Butters.

'Good morning, Maamzelle. Nice morning, ain't it?'

'Ah, yes. You leave us dis day, is it not, Monsieur Bouttare? I am *très-fâchée*, what you call it, very sad you depart before us;' and the soubrette favoured Mr. Butters with a most expressive glance of her wicked dark eyes.

'Well, Maamzelle,' returned Joe, 'I'm sorry myself. It's a tidy, decent, comfortable crib this Childerley. We've been very jolly, ain't we, this last fortnight? and you're just about the nicest gal I've met for many a day.'

'Ah, you tink so? You admire me,' said the soubrette, laughing, and showing a very white, regular set of teeth as she did so.

'You should, you know. It is all one. De propere ting to do. When de maistare make lofe to *la dame*, de man always make lofe to de *femme de chambre*. You understand; as long as your maistare make lofe to Mdlle. Lydia, you ought to make lofe *à moi*; *c'est mon droit naturel*;' and Suzanne gave a saucy toss of her head, which rather insinuated that she thought she could do without the assistance of her *droit naturel*.

'And a very proper view to take of things; not but what you're quite nice enough to feel nuts on without your putting it in the light of my dooty. But, look here, Suzanne, we ain't a going to part for long, you know;' and here the artful Joe drew close to the lady's maid. 'Still,' he continued, 'there's always a pleasure in doing one's dooty;' and as he spoke he suddenly slipped his arm round the soubrette's waist, and snatched a kiss from her rosy lips.

'*Allez-vous-en!*' exclaimed Suzanne, as she wrenched herself free. 'How you dare——'

But a slight shriek and start from the dutiful Joe caused her to burst into a peal of laughter.

That worthy was hopping about on one leg, and giving vent to sundry whistles and groans, as he rubbed and mopped with his handkerchief at the other.

Mdlle. Suzanne, it may be remembered, had a jug of hot water in her hand when she paused to pass the compliments of the morning to Mr. Butters. In the slight struggle, caused by his amorous assault, that hot water had been upset over Mr. Butters' leg. It was not scalding, but quite hot enough to bring the tears into Joe's eyes.

'*Scélérat*,' laughed the soubrette, 'you make lofe too quick. It serve you right. You not hurt serious, hein?'

'Don't know,' responded Joe, ruefully; 'it's gallus hot. This is what comes of doing one's dooty. Look here, Maamzelle, did you do that a purpose?'

'*Non*. You no comprehend your duty.

Your maistare is *un bel homme*,' responded Suzanne, still laughing. 'But *notre affaire*, you see, is, what you call it, ruled by my lady's. Your maistare no kiss, you no kiss; you understand?'

'No, I'm blest if I do. How do you know he don't?'

'I no know. I guess only. But, Monsieur Bouttare, you not angry, are you? *Écoute-moi, mon cher.* Just run down and bring me a leetle more of de hot water;' and Suzanne tended her jug to Joe with a most bewitching smile.

'You don't deserve it, you know you don't. If I do, I'm to be paid for it.'

'I've no money,' laughed Suzanne. 'What you want? You must do it for lofe, Monsieur.'

'Ah, you shall give me a kiss if I fetch it.'

'*Imbécile!* We women, we never give kisses. Go, get me my jug filled.'

'No, I won't! I won't be scalded again,'

replied Joe, sulkily. 'I daresay you'd like to do it.'

'Monsieur Bouttare, *vous êtes un grand sot.* Women never give, but they are very weak, and can't help it when men will take.'

Joe said nothing, but winked pleasantly at the soubrette, and dashed downstairs to obey her behest.

Suzanne leant over the window. She was as wicked a little coquette as ever trod shoe-leather, and had been exercising the whole battery of her fascinations upon Mr. Butters for the last fortnight. He was an astute man was Joe Butters; but the wily French-woman had got considerably the better of him of late. Indignantly as he would have repudiated the idea, it was nevertheless a fact that Suzanne could pretty well wind the usually austere Joe round her finger. Mr. Butters was wont to take a disparaging view of things, horses and women generally —more especially of the last. 'There's no trusting dimity' was a very favourite axiom

of his. Yet this amiable cynic, if he did not altogether trust, had certainly succumbed ignominiously to woman's charms during these last few days.

Suzanne smiles triumphantly as she gazes out over the park. Women of all classes feel a species of intoxication when they make one of the opposite sex bow to their fascinations. Whether they care for the victim or whether they do not, the feeling is the same. Women adore power. When they love, they are apt to make a god of their lover and invest him with strength and talent that he is far from possessing. Then they bow down and worship. When they don't love, they are apt to anatomise the souls of their captives. Men are comparatively mere neophytes in the science of torture. Had the members of the Spanish Inquisition been women, it would have been a 'dour' time indeed for those who did not hold the Catholic faith.

A step on the stairs, and Mr. Butters

emerges from the depths below with a jug of hot water. Rendered cautious by past experience, he deposits this, first of all, at the bottom of the staircase, and then, advancing towards the window, steals his arm round the apparently unconscious soubrette's waist. In a second she yields to it, her face turns to his, and the wicked black eyes look up to him full of coquetry, temptation, and allurement. Then, ere his lips can reach hers, she jerks herself free from his embrace, bestows upon him a smart box on the ears, snatches up her jug, and, jumping up some five or six stairs, exclaims :

'Ah, but Monsieur Bouttare, you are *un peu tard. Mon Dieu!* you expect me to wait ever so long. Don't be angry; *soyez tranquille.* Let me give you one leetle piece of advice. De next time you kiss, you kiss quick. You comprehend de ting better *la première fois*, only for de water *chaude.*'

'Go,' returned Butters, indignantly; 'I wash my hands of you. No Frenchers is to

be trusted, much less female Frenchers. Maamzelle, I repudiates you.'

'Hein! you do noting of de kind. *Venez ici*, Monsieur;' and Suzanne beckoned with her finger that her indignant admirer should approach. 'You no remember *mon droit naturel*. You must be *mon amant*, wezer you like it or no. While le Capitaine make lofe to mi ladi, you most make lofe to me.'

'I shall do nothing of the sort. I don't care about you. You may allez anywhere you like; only allez, that's all I say.'

'*Écoutez*, Monsieur. Your maistare he assist in our leetle entertainment, *le petit drame*—play you call him—we make next month. I sall see *beaucoup* of you about dat.'

'No, you won't, Maamzelle. Wot the Captain's about, to go in for such tomfoolery, beats me altogether.'

'It's no tomfoolery at all. It's *très-joli*, vary nice. You enjoy de play too when you see him,' replied the soubrette, laughing; 'and we have great fun in de *répétitions*, how

you call dem—de getting him up. *Au revoir!*' and with a saucy nod Suzanne tripped up stairs.

Mr. Butters looked after her meditatively, and received another bright smile and quick little nod over the banisters as the girl turned on the landing. He plunged his hands in his breeches pockets, and was for some little time apparently lost in thought. Recovering himself at length, with a low whistle, he murmured: 'They are rum uns, women is, and no mistake. Now there's Suzanne; she's a tidy bit of muslin, she is—one of the small-headed, clean-pasterned sort it does one good to look at. But she's skittish as a clean-bred colt. Wot eyes she has, and ain't they wicked 'uns! Ah, she'd be bad to break—very; shows temper there, or I ain't no judge; and Joe, my boy, you've been reckoned a judge of 'osses in your time. If you understands them, I reckon there ain't much you're not fit to form an opinion about, specially women; they're so like 'em in their skeery

ways—tricky, shying, bolting, and all manner of unpleasantness, half play, half vice. Yes, they're uncommon like young stock are women;' and having arrived at this abstruse conclusion, Mr. Butters picked up the clothes, boots, and hot water, and proceeded to call his master.

CHAPTER III.

'MY LADY'S BOUDOIR.'

A ROOM habited in pale blue—for are not rooms clothed as much as humanity? Have we not all seen the poor naked chamber that boasts no clothes within which to bedeck itself? The tawdry apartment! that tells us at once what manner of personality is identified with it; its garish-worked chairs, its flaunting screens, its flaring carpet, its gilded mirrors, and its gaily and gilded-bound annuals. Do they not preach at once that neither taste nor refinement are dwellers therein? The room of solidity! in which the furniture is all massive, good, heavy, ponderous, and uncomfortable—where the chairs are so straight in the back, and the sofas are constructed with anything but a

view to lounge upon. The snug sanctum of the bachelor! where, though nothing is in its place, yet everything seems at hand. The shabby-looking easy-chairs, places to muse or to sleep in, the sofa often as not doing duty as a bed for some belated friend; the sporting prints, likenesses of the favourites of the ballet, and the well-filled pipe-rack; all these, mixed up with buff-coloured French novels, are another dress in which a room may present itself. The attic, with its dilapidated roof, a table, a broken chair, two or three cracked plates or teacups, a shivering, moaning woman stretched on a paillasse of straw, imperfectly covered with rags, three or four children crying round her for food, and a husband, stupefied with drink, reclining on the bare boards and resting his head against the wall. Such is another livery that an apartment can sometimes assume.

But the room of which I am speaking is clothed in pale blue. Azure the curtains, the

pleasant lounging-chairs, the sofas, the paper; mirrors with silver inlaid ebony frames; bits of Sèvres and Dresden, malachite and gilt inkstands, ivory and silver nicknacks, such as paper-knives, letter-weights, &c., decorate the apartment. Fit shrine for the presiding goddess thereof. Such is Lady Mallandaine's boudoir at Childerley.

Mi ladi lounges there this morning in one of the sky-blue chairs, which presents an appropriate setting to the jewel it holds. Her fair hair, blue eyes, delicate complexion, and *petite* figure harmonise well with the draping of the room; opposite to her, occupied with some one of those frivolities which the ladies of our time dignify with the name of work, is seated a sparkling brunette, whose dark brown eyes and *riante* mouth are still flashing and playing at her companion's last speech.

'Sorry they are gone, Cecile?—of course I am. So are you. Two pleasant men like Captain Merriott and Mr. Dance dropping

out of one's circle in the country is a thing to cry about, you know.'

'Well, I don't quite take that view of the case, Lia. I wish we could have kept them a little longer, certainly. If you do cry about them, my dear, don't you think you could limit your emotion to one only? Don't regard their departure in too serious a light,' continued Lady Mallandaine, laughing. 'Ophelia went mad for only one Hamlet, you know.'

In the Mallandaine circle Lydia Remington was always called Lia. The name had come to her in this wise: Cecile's little boy had been unable at first to master the name of Lydia, and in his infantile attempts had succeeded no further than Lia. And Lia she had been to them ever since.

'I speak metaphorically, you know,' retorted Miss Remington. 'I've not met the man yet, Cecile, could make me weep in earnest. They tell us the time comes to most of us, both men and women, once at

least in the course of our lives when we meet our destiny and may have our heart-strings wrung. For my part, I doubt it. Our novelists and poets must tear passion to shreds, you see, or they could produce no dramatic effect; there would be no situations, in short. You, my dear, are the happiest woman I know. You've one of the best husbands in the world, but you hadn't a *grande passion* for him when you married him;' and Lia looked a little inquisitively at her companion.

'No,' replied Lady Mallandaine, and her face flushed slightly as she spoke; 'I don't pretend to you that I was violently in love with Hervey when I married him. I liked him much, and esteemed him still more; but I think I should have loved him by this dearly if he would have let me.'

'Let you! good heavens, what do you mean?'

'I mean this, Lia, if he would have let me be to him all I could and would have

been; but he treats me as a child still. He is kind and good to me always; he humours my slightest whim, but he don't let me share his hopes and sorrows. He has never recognised that his child-wife has become a woman, with all a woman's craving for love and sympathy. I was so young when he married me; no wonder he feared to trust me altogether with his worries and troubles. If I stole up to him when he looked grave, and asked what was the matter, he would reply, "Nothing, darling, of any consequence. No use to darken your young life with the shadows that sometimes cross mine." He might *be* right then; I know he's wrong now.'

Lia Remington stared open-eyed at her friend. Never before had she seen Cecile Mallandaine moved in this wise; the delicate lips quivered, and a tear trembled on the long lashes. 'There, never mind, Lia, dear; forget what I have said,' continued Lady Mallandaine. 'I get nervous and out

of sorts sometimes down here, and conjure up all sorts of grievances that don't exist.'

A silence of some minutes took place. They were dear friends those two. Friends from their schoolhood—only children both of them. But the bringing up of the twain had been very different. Lydia Remington, child of wealthy parents, from her birth had been accustomed to luxury and display. This very training had imparted a tinge of worldliness to her character. But she was endued by nature with a frank, free, generous disposition that had prevented her from hardening into the worldly young lady women who have attained their twenty-first year are a little wont to become under such circumstances. There was a deal of honest, genuine enthusiasm in Lydia Remington for all that was noble in art, literature, or humanity. She was untainted by the polished scepticism of the day. She could believe in her fellow-creatures who counted neither wealth nor rank amongst their credentials.

She felt considerable contempt for those who took their status in society chiefly on one or other of those platforms. She had, moreover, a quick tongue of her own, and was wont to use it a little sharply on those who displeased her. Sole heiress of her respected father's accumulations in the City hive, it was a matter of course that she had more than one pretender to her hand; but Lydia's somewhat brusque manner had rather staggered most of these. True, the impecunious, to whom marriage was synonymous with relief from destitution, were not to be repelled by such rebuffs. If you 'go in' for restoring your shattered fortunes by matrimony, you have of course made up your mind to the swallowing of much dirt, should needs be. But Lydia was far too clever a girl not to reckon up her admirers at a pretty true valuation, and ran little risk from such sieges as these. Underlying her character was a strong tinge of romance. Strange thing in these days of realism and unbelief!

Cecile Mallandaine, on the other hand, was the only daughter of a quiet visionary country clergyman, whose whole mind was absorbed in roots. I speak etymologically. He had devoted the best part of his life to the consideration of whether the Scandinavian, the Celtic, or the Teuton tongue had formed the principal basis of our hybrid English language. Like most men indulging in such researches, his opinion changed pretty regularly every two years. He lived a quiet dream-like life in his study, 'mid his books and his papers. Two things alone had roused him much of late years from these abstruse speculations. First, the death of his wife, which took place when Cecile was in her sixteenth year; and, secondly, when, some eighteen months afterwards, Sir Hervey had asked him for Cecile in marriage. He had listened dumbfounded to the baronet's proposal. In his eyes Cecile was as yet quite a child; but he liked and respected Mallandaine, and at last, ascending from his

root-grubbing dream-land, he contemplated the affair in a mundane light, and saw that it was a better marriage than his girl could have possibly hoped for.

To Cecile this announcement came as a thunder-clap. She had known Sir Hervey all her young life. He had always been kind to her—even rather petted her as a child; but most assuredly her girlish fancy had never pictured him as a lover. Still, the life at the old ivy-covered rectory was so stagnant; she had seen so little of the world, and her father so strongly put before her the advantages of the position that she would bear as Sir Hervey's wife, that she found but little difficulty in assenting.

'My income, darling,' Mr. Bertrand had said to her, 'is mostly but life income. You live in comfort here; but should anything happen to me, you will have to face the world on slender resources and with no protector. My family I quarrelled with upon the occasion of my marriage. Your mother's,

Cecile, are none of them in such position as to offer you a comfortable home. I have known Hervey Mallandaine for years, and never knew him do a mean or dishonourable thing. Do as you like, child; but think well before you say him nay. I grant he is much older than you, but I was many years older than your mother when I married her, and we were very happy together. Your fate is in your own hands, child, but I would fain see you Hervey Mallandaine's wife.'

And after a few tears over that girlish ideal which the maiden imagination invariably depicts, Cecile said 'Yes;' and the bells of Childerley welcomed her as Lady Mallandaine. She had been popular in the parish as Miss Bertrand; but as lady of the big house she became an object of worship—not an uncommon progression as our status in life advances. But do you think, my brethren, there will be many to ask after you as the flood-tide of life's ill-fortune reaches your chin? I trow not. We idolise

success in these days, but sympathise little with those who fail to breast the tide. Modern idolatry is a thing of a season. We place our gods upon pedestals one year, and spit upon them the next. Great poet, great statesman, great general, was he? But when? Fatal interrogatory! Ah! yes, no doubt, a great man in his time! But we worship not at the altars of our forefathers. We rehabilitate their historical enormities. We crucify those to whom they bent the knee. *Tempora mutantur*; minds and morals likewise.

'I am sorry,' said Lydia, gravely, at last. 'I am afraid, dearest, I have led you into saying more than you intended. Better, Cecile, we should forget what has passed, is it not?'

'Yes—no. Lia, you are the only real woman friend I have in the world. I know I can trust you, and it's a relief sometimes to pour out even our whimsies into somebody's bosom.'

'But, Cecile, you and Sir Hervey have at all events one great bond of sympathy in little Bertie.'

'Ah, yes,' replied Lady Mallandaine, softly. 'You know how I dote upon him; yet in that quiet undemonstrative way of his, I doubt if Hervey is not as fond of the little imp as I am.'

'And he will bring you closer together yet, Cecile. Trust me, I speak like a prophetess. You will be to your husband yet all that you now long to be. Wicked little monster! do you know what he did yesterday?'

'No;' and Lady Mallandaine lifted her blue eyes in mute interrogation.

'The little animal was curled up in one of the library chairs while I was rehearsing, with Captain Merriott, that love scene, you know; and Alec—I mean Captain Merriott—was dreadfully absurd about it. He kept insisting on it that we must go through that embracing part—kept arguing that it

was only acting,' continued Lydia, blushing; 'that the great thing was to be "natural, wasn't it?" and he should never succeed in that particular if I didn't rehearse it regularly. As if that was likely!'

'Not in the least, my dear,' said Lady Mallandaine, laughing. 'Shocking to think of. Well, what had poor Bertie to say to it?'

'Why he started up, and—My gracious, here the little torment comes in proper person;' and as she spoke the door opened, and a fair-haired child, clad in a dark velvet frock, entered, and after deliberately contemplating the twain, ran across to his mother, and jumped upon her lap.

'Come here, Sir,' said Lydia Remington. 'I want to talk to you, Bertie. You don't know what lots of sugar-plums you may not find in my pockets this morning.'

'Go and speak to Lia, darling. Lia has something to say to you,' said Lady Mallandaine, as she kissed the boy.

'No, Mamma, Lia is naughty!'

'What do you mean, Bertie?'

'Lia is naughty, very naughty!'

'Why, what has she done, child?'

'Mamma, when I say my lesson quite right, you always kiss me, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, Captain Merriott said his lesson—such a long lesson—so well; much better than I can do, Mamma; and, naughty Lia, she wouldn't kiss him!'

'That was very wrong of Lia, wasn't it?' said Cecile, and she bent her head laughingly over her child. 'But I think, Bertie, I should go and forgive her now, and tell her she must kiss Captain Merriott next time if he does his lesson well.'

'Will you, Lia?' asked the boy, raising his rosy face from his mother's breast and looking inquisitively at Miss Remington.

'I don't know; come here, Bertie, and then I'll tell you.'

'No,' replied the child. 'Lia sets me

lessons sometimes, Mamma, and she always kisses me when I'm good; and I never said my lessons so well as Captain Merriott. She's a naughty Lia; I won't do any more lessons for her.'

'Come here, you little atrocity, and I will kiss you and set you no lessons.'

'I'm not a 'trocity, am I, Mamma?'

'No, darling; but run over now and make friends with Lia.'

'Will Lia promise to be good, and give me sugar-plums?'

'Yes, Bertie, darling;' and Miss Remington rattled a well-filled *bonbonnière* in her hand.

There was no withstanding that. The boy stepped from his mother's knee, walked across to Lia, and succumbed to her caresses and burnt almonds.

Infantile idolatry is sweetmeats. Children of far larger growth are equally corruptible through the stomach. The votaries of the art of which Brillat Savarin was high-priest sway both men and opinions. If people

dined satisfactorily, there would be no revolutions. The chaotic upheaving of the masses is a furious and unrestrainable desire to share the loaves and fishes of the upper classes. They do not so much covet their particular loaves and fishes, but it is necessary that they obtain food of some kind. Man must live. The old cynical jest 'does not see that necessity,' but the carnivorous animal does, and is docile neither to priest, politician, nor philanthropist in his hour of hunger. A slight fact that England hardly appreciates in these days—days, too, of much legislation as they are.

But a slight tap at the door is followed by the appearance of nurse. Master Bertie, his virtuous fit of indignation completely evaporated, kisses his Mamma and his dear Lia most affectionately, and, with a bonbon of portentous size, as regards his physical well-doing, in his fist, takes his departure.

'Little monkey,' laughed Miss Remington, 'how he did tease me unknowingly.

Suppose he had brought all this out in the drawing-room, Cecile!'

'Well, my dear,' said Lady Mallandaine, demurely, though she had to bite her delicate lips to keep from laughing, 'I think then you would have considered that it would have been best to let Captain Merriott rehearse that embrace.'

'Cecile, I won't be laughed at,' exclaimed Miss Remington, springing to her feet. 'What do you mean?'

'Nothing, my dear; what should I mean?'

'Provoking thing, why won't you speak out? You think I'm *épris* with Alec Merriott?'

'I'll say nothing about that, but I'm quite sure, Lia, that he is very devoted to you. How far you mean to encourage his devotion I honestly confess I can't judge. You have been kind to him I should say this last fortnight. Interests of the drama, I presume?'

Very handsome looked Lydia as she stood confronting her hostess—the pale December

sun lighting up her rich brown tresses, her dark eyes sparkling, and the blood mantling her cheeks.

'You're wrong, Cecile; not but what I like Alec Merriott too; but the man to whom I give my heart must have made his mark in this world. A romantic idea, you'll say. Perhaps so; but I've a tinge of romance about me, in spite of all my bringing up. I don't go the length of desiring poverty with genius. I have been too much accustomed to luxury all my life to be able to dispense with it now. An ill-organised *ménage* repels me. But I cannot love a man I cannot look up to. My lover must be my master. To love, I must stand a little in awe. Now, I can't say the men I've met so far appal me at all, and if I rather like Alec Merriott I assuredly don't look up to him.'

'You foolish Lia. I'm two years younger than you, and don't believe I've seen as much of the world as you have. But, mark me, you'll end by doing the very opposite of all

this. You will fall in love with, and probably marry, some one who has never done anything remarkable, and he'll most likely be much nicer, pleasanter, and more agreeable than if he had. The few men I've met, my dear, who have distinguished themselves, seem very much aware of it, and always gave me the idea of expecting me to remember it also. Now, Lia, you know we expect men to admire us and not themselves.'

'Do we, you innocent little worldling? Then all I can say in these days is, that we are doomed to infinite disappointment. The egotistical wretches—they think it too much trouble to dance, and it's difficult to extract even the ordinary courtesy due to us from them. I always wait patiently myself, or else they never do more than make a feint of opening a door for you. One must draw the line somewhere, and as long as there's a man in the room he shall do that much for me.' And as she spoke Lia drew herself up to her full height, threw back her head, and

seemed to challenge an invisible multitude of male humanity to refuse her bidding.

'Ah,' laughed Cecile, rising, 'he would be a bold man who should refuse to obey your behest just now. But come, let us go and see after some luncheon, and as we havn't a victim at present, why I'll open the door for you myself.'

CHAPTER IV.

'ERNEST DE VITRE.'

A MURKY London morning—a day when one feels at war with one's species, when we feel intuitively that our letters will be harbingers of evil, that the papers will contain nothing of interest, that our friends will preface their converse with 'what wretched weather!' and we are conscious that the atmosphere is charged with depression. It is London in December —London in its most draggled state; theatres, if open, exhibiting mere stock pieces, their energies absorbed in the getting up of the pantomime—London just before the holly, and Christmas beef, turkeys, sausages, plum-puddings, other good cheer, and stupendous advertisements regarding fit Christmas gifts appear. A truly dead time in

the big hive. The clubs are empty, the scattered members thereof more bilious and acidulated than usual, more bitter in the tongue, more peremptory than ever on the subject of fires, papers, and drafts; more convinced than usual that their own individual establishment is guilty of the most heinous mismanagement, and worst cookery in all Town. A thick yellow fog seems to permeate everything. It lies heavy in the throats of the 'bus conductors, and penetrates the bones of the crossing-sweepers; works its way up into the miserable attics where yet more miserable women, by the light of candles they can ill afford, sit stitching for dear life; pervades with its noisome, depressing miasma the breakfast-tables of Belgravia, and chills the frames of the countless City clerks as they hurry up the Strand or through Fleet Street, on their way to business. It hurtles, curls, and insinuates itself round and about one of those narrow streets in the vicinity of Old Jewry, and even invades the sacred precincts

of the Fiddle and String Department—department consecrated for many years to jobbery, corruption, and other uncleanness, but quite necessary in these days of contrary legislation, when the great art of political warfare is embodied in the maxim of 'having prevented your opponents doing anything useful in their generation, your clear duty is then to bring in the measures you previously opposed.' The insidious vapour, with a true democratic tendency, has worked its way up the stone staircase which characterises that venerable institution, administered a slight choking fit to the under-clerks, and penetrated the room of Mr. Ernest De Vitre, a man of considerable mark in that influential establishment. People, indeed, learned in the somewhat abstruse working of the Fiddle and String Department, had been heard to say that they would considerably prefer De Vitre's interest in their favour to that of the nominal chief. They were right. De Vitre was the heart of the office, his word law

therein, and he a man of a temper little likely to countenance any saplings that were not of his own planting.

Ernest De Vitre sits in his room somewhat moodily this sombre morning; excellent as is the fire, easy as is the big leather chair in which he reclines, he exhibits but a moody face. A dark handsome face, with reckless, resolute eyes, and a latent sneer about the mouth. His hair is just shot with grey; so slightly as to be imperceptible by night. Clean shaved on the upper lip, but with a pair of symmetrical whiskers. A man well known on town; popular with many, feared by many. A man of great intellectual power; a man of great social power. He believed in nothing, had an excellent digestion, and was not much troubled with a heart. His acquaintances were numerous, his allies he could count upon his fingers. He had no belief in friends. Such was Ernest De Vitre—a man of good family, but no more. Yet the London world bowed

down to him. Clever and sarcastic—yes! But it was not that. It was the immovable serenity, the intense cynicism that he brought into the fray. When you want nothing, and have a great contempt for them, the civility of your acquaintance is wont to become sycophantic. Men of this type, as a rule, abjure society; De Vitre did not. The cards of the best people in London were on his table.

When De Vitre first left college and joined the Fiddle and String Department, he was wholly dependent on an uncle. His parents had died while he was yet but a child, and left but little of this world's goods behind them. His father's elder brother, a man of good property, had brought him up. A liberal but austere man, who, his nephew felt, would brook no wildness or irregularity on his part. De Vitre was a man to whom luxury was a necessity. Self-sacrifice did not exist in his catalogue of virtues. The gratification of his passions he held to be merely following

the dictates of nature. When the dictates of nature mean tastes for all the sybarite pleasures of London life, such as racing, pigeon-shooting, the opera, together with a considerable *penchant* for gallantry, an allowance of three hundred a year, and the modest salary awarded to a neophyte in a public office, do not go far in the pursuit.

Society has weaknesses; society has corns; society is replete with tender places; society partakes immensely of the character of the sheep. It is both timid, and follows its leader. Study the social weaknesses and fears of some of the leaders thereof, and you become a necessity of their circle. They either fear your tongue or demand your support. Once established with its leaders, and society follows suit; as sheep tread on each other's heels through a gateway. There are skeletons in all houses; with knowledge of such skeleton you become either an ally to be attached, or an enemy to be conciliated.

Such was the formula upon which Ernest de Vitre began his London life. He mixed freely with men of all sorts—theatrical people, literary people, racing men, rowing men, club men. The result, in the hands of a clever man, was a variety of useful information of which he made dexterous use. He gave a hint to Lord Plunganpunt that the favourite for the Leger was not in the least intended to try for that important race; he let Lady Callander understand that he knew where her diamonds were in pawn; warned that model of respectability and piety, Sir William Clarkson, that that little second *ménage* of his in the vicinity of 'Lords' was already suspected by his good lady. Welcome guest immediately in all three establishments!

'I have a taste,' reasoned Ernest de Vitre, 'for all the luxuries enjoyed by the wealthy. My own income denies me their indulgence. Now, my theory is precisely that of St. Evremond, whose sole receipt for quelling

his passions was to indulge them. I have excellent introductions, income sufficient to defray the expense of lodging, dress, washing, kid gloves, &c.—that is, to provide myself with the necessaries of life. For the luxuries, I must look to my acquaintance. Nobody in this world gives anything without an equivalent. Now, to gain a footing with the people who are able to administer to my wants, there are three courses open to me. I must amuse them, I must be of use to them, or I must be a terror to them. I repudiate the first. I decline to tumble for my dry champagne, seats at the opera, ball tickets, autumn shooting, &c. I shall adopt the other two courses. I prefer that the run of their country-houses and town establishments should be conceded, because I am likely to be dangerous in opposition. I have no objection to being of use in some sort to them, provided they are of use to me.' In such wise argued Ernest de Vitre on beginning life in London.

When De Vitre talked of 'being of use to people,' do not for one moment imagine that he contemplated enacting that contemptible *rôle*, to wit, 'the useful man'—the man who earns his bread, verily of bitterness, so hardly; who will always make a fourth at whist; dance at his hostess's behest with those unfortunately plain girls whom every one else treats as the Levite did him that fell among thieves, and passeth by; or who is to be disposed of on the back seats of carriages; to be consigned to the clutches of elderly spinsters curious in the acquisition of knowledge on the subject of billiards; in short, to do duty as a buffer, and take the dead weights of a party off the hostess's hands. Far from it. It was little in that wise that De Vitre contemplated being of use to society. Rash would have been host or hostess who, even in his early days, should have meditated employing De Vitre in that fashion. What he meant by being useful in his generation to society was

embodied in such hints as I have mentioned that he bestowed on Lord Plunganpunt and Sir William Clarkson.

Rudeness is a science. To be politely rude requires natural talent and considerable cultivation. Any fool can be coarsely rude. It is so very easy to insult anyone. Such is mere brutality; a line of action that at once draws forth the condemnation of the world, and probably unpleasant consequences, unless great physique should protect the author of such *sans culottism*. But the bitter rapier-like stabs that must bleed inwardly, those wounds at which society so chuckles, and which our latter-day training requires us to bear unmoved: the art of insult admissible only in the best circles —ah! that is a thing of study. We have all seen some one, either man or woman, writhe under an impertinence and be powerless to resent it. There is nothing tangible to lay hold of. To show your indignation is to acknowledge the hit, to evoke

the laughter of the bystanders, and to confess ignorance of the days you live in. You must keep pace with the age of which you form a part. If the power of retort lies not within you, either by nature or cultivation, then brace your mind to bear the polished rudeness of the nineteenth century with the stoicism that epoch demands of you.

Ernest De Vitre had early mastered this fact, and could be acrid as the hyssop when occasion demanded. Society rapidly recognised that power in him. Society, as I have before said, is sheepish in its character, and when three or four of its leaders had opened their eyes to and acknowledged this trait in De Vitre, it bowed to, and believed in, a tongue too sarcastic to be provoked. But Ernest was far too clever a man to seek to establish his footing in the London world entirely on these grounds. He was a favourite with most women. To them his manner, except under bitter provocation, was uniformly soft and caressing; a tribute

they appreciated the more, because with men he affected considerable *hauteur* and indifference.

All this, it must be borne in mind, is descriptive of De Vitre's first start on the troubled sea of London life. Some five years previously to the commencement of this narrative De Vitre's uncle had died, and left him an income of four thousand a year. At this time he was of the London elect, with the *entrée* to one of the best and fastest sets in the world of Belgravia. He was now high in his office, a man of mark therein, with considerable patronage, more or less indirectly, running through his hands. He had acquired a taste for power; pulling the strings of the puppets had grown to be a necessity to him, and strings he pulled, with sneering lips that neither Belgravian nor theatrical circles deemed of. The Fiddle and String Department, as a rule, gave him credit for much manipulation of the wires that involved the working of their very

complex administration; and junior clerks grumbled with bated breath over favouritism, interest, &c., which they deemed swayed promotion and other things in their time-honoured jobbing institution.

De Vitre had become accustomed to the harness. If the collar had rather galled at starting, it sat easy enough in these later days. There is a vast difference between the stool and desk of the neophyte and the comfortable easy-chair of the past master. He liked, moreover, the power and patronage afforded him; for this man, cynic and sybarite as he was, like most men of intellect, had his ambitious cravings. From the career he had embarked in, he could hope for little more than he already held, but he wielded undoubted sway in the Fiddle and String Department, and though the thousand a year he now drew from it was hardly an object to him, yet he had decided, to the weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth of those who had deemed the exchange of their

somewhat tight boots for De Vitre's easy slippers a certainty on his uncle's death, to still hold his position therein. Such is the man who is now in a somewhat sombre mood, running through his letters in the comfortable room set apart for the second in command of this most important department.

'Odd,' he muttered, as he mused over an epistle written on thin foreign paper. 'Havn't heard of Wyndham Gwynne for ages, and now I get a letter from him. Eight years since he and I were close allies. Pleasant times they were too. It was those pleasant times, by the way, sent him to India, no doubt, and the penalties thereof that have kept him so long in exile. Indiscreet as usual, Wyndham never could learn the art of being silent. What the devil does he want to refer back to our old days at Lasterton for, and what put it into his head to ask if I knew what had become of my old flame, the little governess down there?

He never could have known the *dénouement* of that history, I should think. It's not a subject I am much given to look back upon. Who could have guessed the little thing would have taken matters the way she did? As for her present whereabouts, by gad, he knows as much as I do. I moved heaven and earth to find her once, without success, but she had well-nigh faded from my memory till his letter recalled her. I wonder what did become of her; she disappeared like an *ignis fatuus*. Yes, I was terribly weak about her in those days. Quite lost my head, and cared more for that little chit than a sensible man ever should care for a woman. Suppose I wasn't a sensible man in those Lasterton times; and yet I reckoned myself no fool at eight-and-twenty—on that subject, at all events. But we're all children at times, when we fall into the hands of the fair sex. As Pauline St. Leger said the other day: "We make fools of you all, unless you're our fatality;" and if personal experience goes

for aught, she should be a judge. She has dealt out as much intoxication to men in her time as ever did the Circe of the ancients. By the way, if one ever could do Pauline the injustice of supposing that she was in earnest about a flirtation, I should deem her *épris* with Roland Dance. *Cui bono?* I can't guess; at all events, it is not probable it will be for Dance's. I don't understand her play there; he has no money, and Pauline generally looks that her admirers should be gilded at all events. She wants so many things—opera boxes, &c.—and St. Leger, I know, has had a bad year. The turf has been so unkind to him this season, that she's not likely to find much assistance or sinews of war in the matrimonial firm. On short allowance, there, I should fancy; and luxury is a necessity to her as it is to me.'

He rose, stirred the fire, and began moodily to pace the room. 'What a cursed day,' he murmured, as he paused and glanced out of

the window. 'Fool that I was not to have taken leave, and gone into the country somewhere. God knows I've plenty of invitations.' What could have brought back those Lasterton days to Wyndham Gwynne's recollection? What could have induced him to mention them in a letter to me? Write! he wanted his name put up for the Alcibiades; that's tangible enough; but why allude to that fishing excursion?' and, resuming his seat, Ernest De Vitre leant his head upon his hand, while memory carried him back eight years in his life.

He saw again the quaint rustic inn by the river, with its tiled gables, half-smothered in creepers, climbing-roses, honeysuckle and jasmine, that he and Gwynne had inhabited eight years ago. The trout stream ran brawling at the foot of the pretty garden. How bored he had been with it all at first; how flat it seemed after the fast London life which the doctors and Nature had both warned him to abandon. How the fresh

air and regular hours had made them different men by the end of a week. With what gusto they relished the cheese and bacon, or ham and eggs, that pretty well comprised their bill of fare. How well he recollected his first meeting with that bright girlish figure in the low-water meadows, and her terror of the somewhat ill-behaved cow that had made them acquainted. He could call to mind even now the light-blue bonnet and white draperies she wore upon the occasion. What a dear little thing she was—so trusting and innocent; and how had he repaid that trust? 'Pshaw,' he muttered, as his lip curled, '*au diable* with these old memories.' But old memories are not quite so easily laid at times, and though he had taken up his pen and commenced to write, a fair face, with soft blue eyes, seemed to hover between his and the paper. He recalled many a stroll along those low-water meadows and through the old Cathedral close, and as he did so the pen dropped

from his fingers, and Ernest De Vitre sat once more buried in thought. He had had many an *affaire* in his day, but as he mused he was fain to confess that he had never cared for woman before or since as he had for that bright fair-haired girl down at Lasterton. The pretty foreign accent in which she had confessed her love still rang in his ears. How well he recollected the evening she had whispered, 'I am so happy, so rich. I was such a poor little thing—no friends, no one to care for, or to love me. Now I have everything. Ernest, you are my all; you love me; I want no more.' Did another speech of that lost love of his recur to him? —one that she made a little later. I trow yes, or the set mouth and knit brows are no indication of the workings of man's mind. A speech, or rather a note, in which she said, 'I was poor when I met you. I leave you beggared of honour, faith, belief and trust in human being. God help me, and forgive you.'

'It's no use,' he exclaimed at last, 'I can't work. The devil take Wyndham Gwynne for evoking these old memories. Yes, Wyndham, my boy, I shall put you up for the Alcibiades, and take deuced good care you are duly black-balled when your time comes. A man with such a taste for early reminiscences is intolerable in days when the *raconteur* of last week's news is not to be borne with;' and having sent word to the next in authority that he was required on business elsewhere, Ernest De Vitre plunged out into the yellow fog and sought oblivion of his early sin.

Ah, yes. You may be sceptic, sybarite, or pagan, as you choose, but for the intellectual and cultivated man there is a court from which there is no appeal. These men carry about them a conscience, seared and blunted it may be; dead upon many points that good men deem of vital importance; but still they have a code (creed would hardly express my meaning), infraction of which hangs heavily on

their souls. The infringement of half the Decalogue weighs little upon the minds of such men as De Vitre, but they have an indistinctly defined code of honour that stands to them in the place of religion. Not very efficient morality this, I grant you, but such as it is they hold more strictly by it than many who profess considerably more. In these times of much mock-religion, is it not something, at all events, to see a man act up to his professions, little as they may be? In days when people declare so much, and perform so little, it is edifying to see the good deeds occasionally accomplished by these poor backsliders who profess nothing.

CHAPTER V.

'THE REHEARSAL.'

A BLEAK east wind, with one of those shimmering February suns that are but of little account—mere glitter, with no warmth in them—blinking over the wild moorland and sandy-grown heather, tinting those rows upon rows of black little huts with its faint gilding, and flashing up a little over the glass-covered parades of the permanent barracks and roof of the racquet-court. A route-marching day at Aldershott. The army comes streaming home with dusty boots and dirty faces. The army, as a rule, is weeping. From the colonel to the drummer can be traced two distinct black streaks running from the corner of the eye to the mouth, the result of the black dust which

the east wind scatters so freely. A true democrat and no respecter of persons your east wind, and he has shown no more deference to the general than to the fifer this February morning. The army solaces itself a good deal with pipes and light *badinage*. It curses the weather, speaks disparagingly rather of the morning's entertainment; but, above all, it weeps. The more it wipes its eyes the dirtier the numberless faces that constitute it become—varying from the two before-mentioned streaks to smudging that might give the idea of vague attempts at the regular Ethiopian serenader's make-up. The army has been concentrating itself this morning at Farnham, and has protected that town from the ravages of an imaginary enemy with considerable ability and distinction. Colonels and generals look a little wofully at the skeleton battalions, weak batteries, and dragoon regiments, as they call to mind experiences of this sort of thing having to be done in genuine earnest, and contrast

their resources then with those of these latter days. They muse a little, perhaps, over that saying of the Great Frederick's, that 'God is with the great squadrons.' However, the army approaches its cantonments, like all armies, savage for food, and, having in some measure cleansed its face or faces, precipitates itself on dinner in default of other foe—that is to say, the rank and file do; the officers follow their example, but call it by the name of lunch.

In one of the cavalry mess-rooms in the permanent barracks, our old acquaintance Alec Merriott is practically exemplifying his theory that nothing makes you so consumedly hungry as route-marching.

'Cleavers, my boy,' he exclaims, 'send the potatoes and that cup across. Very pleasant brew, by the way, does old Judkins (the head mess-waiter) credit. Taking, or protecting, or whatever we did relative to Farnham this morning, is deuced hungry work. Can't say I ever quite know what

we're up to on these occasions. Our generals keep their intentions as dark as if they might influence the funds, or there really was an enemy in the background.'

'No use explaining to a fellow like you, who's always thinking of hunting, shooting, or cricket.'

'Might happen to have been a good thing to have given me a little knowledge of the business, all the same,' retorted Alec. 'A little insight into these imaginary field-days would open our eyes a bit; and, I take it, the wider awake a commander finds his subordinates, the better for all concerned, especially him, when the play turns to earnest.'

Cleavers rather stared. Alec was a good officer, but this was quite a new formula for him to enunciate.

'Well,' he exclaimed at last, 'I'm off to town, and shall leave the authorities to talk over the taking or defending of Farnham, as the case may be. Will you come, Alec?'

'No! Avaunt tempter! Am I not vowed to the drama? A poor votary at the shrine of Thalia. Oh, Lord, and don't I wish I wasn't? Did you ever act, Jack?'

'Once,' replied the other, drily.

'Find it difficult?'

'Not at all. I had only some half-dozen sentences to say; was in an awful funk; drank a tumbler of champagne just before I went on, forgot every word of them, was hustled off amidst roars of laughter, and havn't been asked to perform since. Shouldn't if I was; don't think I'm cut out for an actor.'

'It is difficult learning the words,' said Alec, musingly.

'Not the least,' rejoined Cleavers; 'only trouble is recollecting them when you want 'em. I knew mine well enough anywhere except on the stage.'

'Oh, but you overdid the winding-up business. Drank a bottle of champagne; screwed as an owl, no doubt.'

'Devil a bit; might have done better if I had been, perhaps. I was simply paralysed. Well, I'm off. Going to make Butters put you through, I suppose? Take my advice, Alec, and get hold of a professional from town.'

'By G—d! never thought of that. I will; I'll come up to-morrow, and see about it;' and, nodding to his comrade, Alec Merriott strolled across to his own quarters.

Arrived there, Alec's proceedings are worthy of commemoration. He first divested himself of his uniform, then indulged in the luxury of a warm bath, and finally, having attired himself in a gorgeous smoking-jacket and slippers, proceeded to fill a *brûle-gueule*, and light it. That achieved, he took up a small book of Lacy's acting edition of the drama, and commenced to study it with an intensity gratifying to witness, and that should have stood him in good stead could Lia Remington only have witnessed it.

'Extraordinary thing,' he exclaimed, after

some time, 'how one's thoughts wander. I can't get a bit of this into my head; I keep reading it over and over again, and thinking of Lia Remington, what's going to win the Liverpool, or anything, in short, but this confounded play. Strikes me they're more amusing to see acted than read, by a long chalk. And as for acting them oneself——' and here the speaker paused, shrugged his shoulders, and emitted a cloud of tobacco from under his moustache. 'Well, I didn't want to do it. I never thought it would be fun; never much thought I could do it. That's the deuce and all of getting fond of a girl in earnest; they are always leading you into some mess or other. As if we didn't know best where our strength lay, with our own lights to guide us. However, I'm in for it now; as the song says—

> Oh, what is the use of repining,
> For where there's a will there's a way.

Hang it, I hope so, though I'm blessed if I see the way much at present. This won't

do; I'm not progressing a yard'—and, springing to his feet, Alec first rang the bell, and then, from habit, opened his door, and vociferated 'Butters!' at the top of his voice.

A faint 'Yes, Sir' came up from the depths of the basement, followed in a few seconds by Mr. Butters in proper person.

'Did you want anything, Sir?' enquired that worthy.

'Shouldn't have halloaed, if I hadn't,' responded his master. 'Here, you have got to hear me all this through again. Now, don't be stupid over it to-day; recollect what I told you yesterday. You're to read out all those lines marked underneath with ink; those are the cues. Begin there; catch hold——' and, to Butler's evident dismay, his master thrust the book into his hand.

'In course I'll do my best, Sir; but this here play-acting beats me altogether. If it were anything about horses, now ——'

'Which it isn't,' interrupted his master; 'wish to God it was. Hold your tongue,

and do as you're told. You're rather fond of relating your experiences of a racing-stable. I take it they taught you that as part of your alphabet?'

'Quite right, Sir,' said Butters, brightening at this allusion to what he conceived the highest employment of man. 'I'll do my dooty by you, Sir. You're entered for these stakes, and bound to run. It ain't my dooty, now you've made up your mind, to tell you you're running out of your class. My dooty, clear away, Mr. Alec, is to pitch you out as fit as ever I can make you. I don't want to be disrespectful, but it raythe strikes me, Sir, you're terrible short of work at present.'

To account for Mr. Butters' somewhat easy manner with his master, I must mention that he had begun life in a Yorkshire training-stable, from which, sore tribulation to Joe, his increasing weight had at length necessitated his discharge. He had then become stud groom to Alec Merriott's

father, a situation he obtained when Alec was quite a boy, and continued to fill most satisfactorily till the death of the old gentleman some four or five years back; since when he had officiated as prime minister to the son.

'Then you don't particularly fancy me this time, Joe? havn't much confidence in my success, eh?' enquired Merriott, laughing.

'Wot d'ye want to go out of your line for? that's wot beats me. When you're a known good horse on the flat, wot's the use of entering for hurdles, Sir? If it was pigeons, cricket, or a spin across country, I'd have no fear of your pulling through. But this play-acting—we never trained for it before, you see, and the worst is'—and here Butters lowered his voice and looked very grave and mysterious—'we ain't got nothing to try with.'

Alec Merriott burst out into a roar of laughter as he put down his pipe. 'You

old croaker,' he exclaimed, 'didn't I win the Holmeswood steeplechase, and weren't you in just as great a state of mind then because we had nothing to try the mare with? Think of that, man; besides, in this business we never try except in public. Put your old training-stable ideas out of your head for a bit, and fire away.'

'Well, we did win then, there ain't no denying it, and you rode judgematical, that you did. I gives you all manner of credit as you deserves, Mr. Alec, for that. But don't you go laughing at training-stables. They're fine schools, they are; they brings out ideas, if so be one's got any. They teaches wot you call philosphy. We learns how to bear our rewerses; not to be too bumptious when we wins—and wot a deal of uncertainty there is about things generally, and race osses in partickler! Bless me, when one thinks of legs—how they go—how they fills just when they didn't ought! and how——'

'Shut up, will you?' cried his master, 'and

bear a hand with what you've got to do now. Recollect you're training me now.'

'If it was but a running match even,' said the incorrigible Butters. 'Beg pardon, Mr. Alec, I'm just agoing to begin. Only don't go too quick for me; there's nothing like slow work at starting. Now,' he continued, solemnly, with the air of letting off a dangerous firework. '"*I shall know what's what as well as the best of 'em.*"'

'"*Your servant, Madam. I'm glad to find you alone, for I've something of importance to speak to you about.*"'

'"*I shall give you a civil answer.*"'

'"*You give me so obliging a one, it encourages me to tell you in a few words what I think.*" What I think—what I think—what the devil do I think, Joe?'

'I don't know; it ain't down in the book; but if you'd think better of it, may be it'd be the best.'

'Confound you, what comes next. Oh, I know. "*Your father has resolved to make*

me happy as your husband, and I hope you'll do what he tells you."'

'That's not right; leastways it ain't in the book,' said Butters, gravely.

'Bosh, not quite the words, perhaps, but it's near enough. Go on, what's the next cue?'

'"*Sir, I never disobey my father in anything but eating green gooseberries.*"'

'"*So good.*" No. "*I'm therefore impatient.*" Pshaw, what the devil comes after *green gooseberries*?'

'Internal convulsions; leastways, that's my experience mostly,' replied Butters, with perfectly unmoved countenance.

'Confound you, Joe. You're no assistance at all,' exclaimed Merriott, laughing. 'Here, give me the book, do.'

But assistance is at hand, for of a verity Mr. Butters, to do him justice, much against his inclination, is undertaking a task beyond his capabilities when he commences schoolmaster as regards the drama. A cab is seen,

scattering the dust fast between Farnboro' Station and the Barracks, that, at the inspiration of Roland Dance, is destined to bear balm and consolation to the sorely perturbed spirit of Alec Merriott. As it nears the block in which Merriott's rooms are situated, Dance leans out of the window and vociferates some directions to the driver that indicate thorough knowledge of the locality, as well they may. For Roland Dance is as well known at the mess of the —th Lancers as the regimental snuff-box. A few more turns of the wheels and the cab pulls up at the door of the house in which Merriott's rooms are situated.

'Come along, Puffin, my boy,' exclaims Dance, as he springs from the cab. 'This is the home of the infant Roscius. He ought to have been born before the floats and nurtured in a green-room, but you see unfortunately he wasn't, and he

—'had heard of battles, and he longed
To follow to the field some warlike lord;'

and so he became a horse soldier instead of a great tragedian. But, never mind, like all great souls, he is delicately conscious of his own deficiencies. A touch of thy art, a small borrowing of thy experience, and he shall rant it with the best of them, eh?'

'Lead on, I follow thee,' responded the actor, for such in sooth he was, and the pair ran laughingly up the stone staircase and knocked sharply at Merriott's door.

'All hail, most noble Festus! quoth Dance, as he entered. Ha! what, do we find thee in the agony of inspiration? infusing thy part into thy very marrow? Let me introduce you to Mr. Puffin, of the "Parthenon," who has often dispelled the blues, distended our cheeks with laughter, and distilled tears from our eyes in acknowledgment of his exquisite fooling.'

'Charmed to make your acquaintance off the stage, Mr. Puffin,' said Alec. 'That I have known and admired you for a con-

siderable period on it, it is almost superfluous to state.'

The actor bowed.

'Now, Alec,' continued Dance, 'first we want some lunch. Ha! Butters, worthy soul, dost hear thou our requirements?'

'Do you mean you want something to eat, Mr. Dance?'

'Just so. He can get lunch for us here, Alec, can't he?'

'Of course. Run across and see about it, Joe, at once.'

'And then, my boy, we'll have a regular grind at the part. Puffin, here, is kind enough to say he'll give you a lesson and put you up to all the business of it.'

'Upon my word,' said Merriott, 'you'll be conferring a great favour on me, Mr. Puffin, if you don't mind the trouble. I have unfortunately embarked in the drama without the slightest rudimentary knowledge thereof, and "heaped" is the only term that at all describes my present state.'

'Never fear, my boy, we're come from town expressly to breathe the divine afflatus into you. Divine afflatus, by the way, with concomitant of lunch, got to be put into you in precisely two hours, at the expiration of which time we're off.'

'Can't you stop and dine?'

'Thanks, no, Capt. Merriott,' replied the actor, 'the British public expects its Puffin at nine precisely, and can't be disappointed.'

'Exactly,' broke in Dance; 'the Parthenon without Puffin, you see, is like "She Stoops to Conquer" with Tony Lumpkin omitted. Ah! here's Butters and the food. Ready for you in ten minutes now, Alec. Must make a hit of this dramatic venture, old fellow, you know, or Miss Remington will never forgive us.'

'If it was only pigeons,' gasped Butters, 'or anything we wos used to!'

'Pooh, you old croaker,' laughed Dance. 'Look here, Joe, I don't mind telling you—give me some wine—but there's nothing

your master's not capable of.' Butters shook his head solemnly as he filled Roland's glass; he evidently augured very ill of what he would have denominated *their* histrionic powers; for Joe completely identified himself with his master's triumphs in the sporting world, and would, in recounting a successful innings at cricket of Merriott's, have described it as 'we made seventy odd runs, and never gave a chance.'

'Done eating, Puffin?' exclaimed the volatile Dance. 'Now, Alec, where's the book? give us hold. Put a cigar into Puffin's mouth, and attend to what he tells you. I'll read the cues, and he'll superintend.'

The rehearsal commenced, and Merriott became at once conscious of a nervousness he had never experienced before—that dim consciousness of making a fool of himself to which the Englishman is so peculiarly liable. I don't believe that sensation is ever experienced by a Frenchman or an American. They seem to be gifted by nature with a

blessing denied to ourselves. *Aplomb!*—we've no English word quite expresses it—seems to come to them intuitively when placed in strange or awkward situations. It is that delicious conceit in one's self—one of the most comfortable weaknesses man can be endowed with. A conceited man may not be pleasant to meet; but if he is but only thoroughly embued with it, his journey through life comes pleasant to him. Half the people he meets will take him, unless he's an utter fool, at his own valuation. He don't believe that anyone laughs at him, and, to penetrate the armour of self-esteem in which he has clothed himself, takes sharper-pointed arrows than are wont to be launched his way. Of a verity there is much comfort in conceit—remember that, oh, my diffident brethren—away with humility's sackcloth. Bedeck yourselves in purple, shower garlands and offer up sacrifices at the shrine of vanity. The votaries thereof have the best of it in this world.

'Excuse me, Captain Merriott,' said Puffin, after a few minutes, 'but I can't be of much use unless you will try to throw a little action into your part. At present, you know, you're only reciting it. For instance, in your soliloquy here you speak it monotonously; that won't do—you must declaim it. Besides, in a lively comedy such as this is, you must move about, and not deliver that speech all in one place and in one attitude. This is more the sort of thing;' and taking the book out of Dance's hand, the actor rattled through the speech with appropriate air and gesture. 'Now,' he continued, 'follow me closely; I'm going through the soliloquy again, and I want you to imitate me as near as you can afterwards.'

Once more Puffin ran through the speech. 'Now, Captain Merriott, try all you know, and, above all, don't be afraid of it. Over acting is soon toned down under judicious tuition.'

Alec essayed his best, but the imitation was faint in the extreme, and he knew it.

'Stiff, a great deal too stiff. Don't be discouraged about that; ease on the stage is of course an acquirement; to be natural is to seem awkward. There would be much awkwardness noticed in drawing-rooms if an attentive audience were watching. Try that speech again; if you can master that one bit effectively, you'll have learnt a good deal—you will have learnt a little how to use your voice, a little how to move.'

It would be wearisome to follow Merriott further through his tribulation; suffice it to say that little Mr. Puffin worked with wondrous patience and good nature for over an hour in his drilling, and it was finally arranged that Alec should receive some further lessons in town at his hands.

Roland Dance encouraged his friend with much applause and light chaff, but he was by no means satisfied with the performance. He had done a little in the amateur line himself, and knew quite enough about it to feel misgivings concerning Alec's attempts.

'Well, time's up,' he exclaimed at last. 'On we goes again. Cab at the door, eh, Butters? All right, good bye, old fellow; look me up when you're in town for your next lesson. Now, Puffin, flutter.'

'Not in our class, Mr. Dance, that's wot it is,' said Butters, as he shut the cab door. 'It wasn't a satisfactory trial, wos it? But it's best to know the worst. If you can't win, the sooner it's found out the better, ain't it, Sir?'

'You're an old fool, Joe,' retorted Dance, as the trap drove off. 'What do you think of him, Puffin?'

'If he's letter perfect, don't get nervous, and if I have three more afternoons at him, he'll pull through. But he'll never act, if that's what you mean.'

CHAPTER VI.

'THE PERFORMANCE.'

London in March—east wind still strong in the ascendant; springing upon you as you turn corners, throwing dust into your eyes, catarrh into your system, congesting your liver, and enquiring tempestuously whether there is a weak spot about your lungs. Parliament has met, and shopkeepers as usual inform you that town is filling—an assertion that your own experience tells you is untrue. Shopkeepers always do make this visibly erroneous statement at this period of the year. It seems to be a tradition among them; perhaps it is that they would insinuate now is your time to become a purchaser before the flood-tide of competition sets in. Tailors, modistes, &c. begin

to rave about spring fashions, as if anything except blankets could be of much repute in a genuine English spring. The slaves of our legislature, of course, are gathered together. There are execrable propositions to be denounced, wondrous schemes for our regeneration to be supported. There is the usual feverish desire to know what Ministers mean to do this session; there are the economists with a greedy eye for more paring down of the emoluments of those connected with the public service. What signifies efficiency, if you can but reduce taxes?—a great saving to be effected perchance in the Fiddle and String Department. It may be doubtful economy—stupid business people even deem it so—to employ bad servants at reduced salaries in lieu of good men at the higher figure. But reduction looks well in the Budget. And if members have no special eye upon any of these points, their constituencies expect them to vote, even if they don't speak. As in these virtuous days you

don't pay electors for the honour of representing them, it behoveth you should do something for their gratification. If you go into what they deem the wrong lobby, they experience the satisfaction of making up their minds to ask awkward questions in the vacation, and to vote dead against you on the next occasion you may solicit their suffrages.

The Mallandaines have arrived in town and established themselves in Belgravia. My lady has heretofore made but short seasons, Sir Hervey having usually preceded her thither some six weeks or so, and they have generally been amongst the early departures. Cecile has not been strong, and does not bear the racket of London life well. But this year she has accompanied her husband, and tells him she feels strong enough for any amount of gaiety. She has, moreover, promised Lia Remington to witness her histrionic triumphs, and Cecile really is interested in these theatricals. All

women are interested in a love affair, and it is Lady Mallandaine's belief that Lia cares a good deal more about Alec Merriott than she chooses to admit. She has an idea that should Alec be successful in his *rôle* on this occasion, that an *éclaircissement* is likely to take place between the two. Who can tell? You and I, reader, who have been down at Aldershott and seen Merriott in what the astute Mr. Butters would denominate his training, would augur ill of his chance should it hang on such precarious tenure. But woman, bless her! has some weaknesses, and her compassion for failure is infinite. She thinks it is her duty oft-times to pour balm into the wounds of our sore-galled vanity. She will yield, from compassion for our distress, what she would deny us in the hour of victory, and yet if she does care about you, how dearly she loves that you should succeed. Quite a metaphysical problem. Yet I would rather in these circumstances finish a good second

in a steeplechase with a broken collarbone than win. It would be of infinitely more use to one.

Almost needless to say that the Remingtons are in town. Remington *père* finds his house gradually limiting itself in accommodation. His own sanctum was turned into a property-room some days back. He has been warned that his dressing-room will be confiscated on *the night*. The drawing-rooms for some time have been untenantable. Mr. Remington begins to cast jealous eyes on the hall porter's easy-chair, and mentally can see no other place at home in which the study of the 'Times' seems feasible. He feels serious apprehensions of coming to a chop in the butler's pantry, by special favour, as regards dinner. He knows he don't like all this rout, but Mrs. Remington's list of acceptances reduces him to submission. Worshipper of Mammon though he is, yet he, like his wife, has a craving for a fashionable visiting-list and a paragraph in the

'Morning Post.' Besides, it's no use struggling against Lia, and Lia has energetically pronounced that theatricals she will have this season. Mrs. Remington alternates between exultation and despondency. Her feelings are governed principally by the answers she receives to her invitations. She sinks to the depths of despair upon finding the Hon. Mrs. Silverton 'regrets,' &c. She ascends to transcendental bliss upon learning that Lady Manestone 'will be delighted.' Words can hardly depict the dismay with which, rushing breathless into Lia's room to apprise her of Mrs. Silverton's defalcation, she heard her daughter respond, 'Oh, bother Mrs. Silverton, Mamma; she's deaf, stupid, and a bore.'

'But, my dear, she is an Honourable,' gasped Mrs. Remington.

'And we are well and honourably acquitted of her, mother darling. Of course, it was all right to ask her, but I'm glad she's not coming. She's as spiteful and disagree-

able an old lady as there is in all London. Don't fret so much about handles to the name, mother; there's plenty of pleasant people who can't boast of them.'

'Don't be foolish, Lydia; you can't suppose that your father and I are going to put ourselves to all this inconvenience, let alone the expense, to entertain nobodies.'

'No, my mother'—and Lia rose, walked across the room to Mrs. Remington and kissed her—'I don't suppose you would quite understand why you turn the house upside down unless I told you. Shall I tell you? Because you're a dear good mamma, and can't deny your daughter anything; and then, you see, Papa don't know how to say no to you, and so Lia has got her own way, and is having theatricals. Now, don't fret, mother mine. They will go off beautifully; and as for Mrs. Silverton—defend me from Mrs. Silverton!'

'But, Lydia, dear, are you quite sure we shall have a good audience?'

'Good audience!' replied the girl, saucily. 'If I didn't think so, I'd make Alec Merriott bring up half Aldershott, and order Roland Dance to march the War Office down to a man. Think of that for a *claque*;' and Lia laughed merrily at the idea.

Mrs. Remington retired appeased, if not wholly comforted.

The night of the theatricals arrives. The chop in the pantry that he had once contemplated had become of late so very uncertain in Mr. Remington's eyes, that he did what he should have done a week previously—that is, betook himself to his club, and there dined. However, he is back again by this—all white tie and white waistcoat, very red in the face, and bowing at the top of the stairs like a Mandarin. He reminds one a little, as he rubs his hands with 'invisible soap,' of Hood's Sir Jacob, who deemed

> 'He bowed like a Guelph,
> And would gladly have made a bow to himself,
> Had such a bow been feasible.'

People flock in rapidly. They have—that is, the strangers—great uncertainty about their host, and considerable misgivings as to whether he is not the head butler after all. Men of the world shake hands—you always should. What matter if you have shaken hands with the butler; you may find it much to your benefit at supper-time. The situation is far easier retraced than cutting the master of the mansion. When in doubt, shake hands is quite as reliable as the old whist axiom of 'trump,' which latter is generally productive of grief to that thirteenth card your partner has clung to so long.

Mrs. Remington looks imposing enough in maize satin (she had a weakness for red velvet, which has been unscrupulously crushed by her daughter), and no doubt exists concerning the mistress of the mansion. People come trooping in, and Mrs. Remington's heart swells with triumph as many a titled name is vociferated up the

staircase. Ladies of rank are very much like other people, and are wont to assemble where they think they will be amused. There are those who come to sneer at the performance—a good many of these; there are the good folks who expect to be amused —poor creatures; there are those who come because they understand they will meet everybody else there—acting quite in accordance with the laws that principally govern society, these last. It does not matter whether you like it, or want to do it; but if society decrees it the right thing to be done, of course you must do it. Who are you that you should presume to deny sacrifice to the goddess Caprice, usually designated Fashion?

Lady Mallandaine is one of the early arrivals. After greeting Mrs. Remington, she insists upon seeing Lia, and is forthwith ushered up to that young lady's bedroom, whom she finds under the hands of Suzanne.

'Don't speak to me, Cecile,' exclaims Miss

Remington. 'I'm in a state of perturbation about how things will go off. It is all about Alec. Fancy a man who can ride steeplechases being nervous! but he is, he is—he says he's not, but I know better. Suzanne here, too, can see it also.'

'Ah! Mademoiselle; but de Capitaine he recover him nerve after de first, you see. It is *le premier pas qui coûte*, you know. He all right what you call *tout de suite*, directly.

'What, Lia, you nervous? — nonsense. Your theatricals will go off beautifully. Don't be apprehensive about them. You've got such an audience all waiting to applaud you. How pretty you look in your costume. I'm sure it will be all your fault if Captain Merriott forgets his words. If I were him, I think you'd put them all out of my head to-night.'

'Don't flatter, Cecile; but do I look nice?' and Miss Remington sprang from her chair and contemplated herself in the pier-glass. 'Yes, I think I shall do,' she con-

tinued, with a saucy toss of her head, after a brief survey. 'But I must run away now, and harangue mine army before the curtain rises; put strength into the faint-hearted; take courage myself from the bolder spirits. Don't go without seeing me, Cecile, after the struggle is over.'

'Certainly not. Is it likely, Lia, I'd leave without congratulating you on your triumph?'

'Ah, my dear; but if it's the other thing,' retorted Miss Remington, with a little whimsical *moue*.

'But it won't, it can't, and it shan't, be the other thing,' cried Lady Mallandaine, laughing; and if it were, why we should have to cry over your failure together, as we used to do over the old school grievances in days lang syne.'

'*Au revoir*,' cried Miss Remington, with a stamp of her foot and a wave of her pocket-handkerchief. 'I go where glory waits me;' and Lia dashed rapidly downstairs.

Cecile glided quietly back to the reception rooms, which were now well filled. She looked very lovely this evening, with just one magnificent white camellia braided in her fair silken tresses, her eyes sparkling, and her face slightly flushed with her anxiety about the double drama she conceived she was about to witness.

'Good evening, Lady Mallandaine,' exclaimed Roland Dance. 'Come to witness the consummation of the comedy which we viewed in its early throes at Childerley? How's Bertie?'

'Asleep, little darling, by this, I hope,' laughed Cecile; 'but he has been extremely naughty to-night. He was so indignant, poor child, because I wouldn't bring him to see Lia act, and made me promise to wake him when I came home, and tell him all about it.'

'A promise, I presume, you will hardly comply with?

'I don't know. I am very foolish about

my boy—a fact, no doubt, Mr. Dance, you have already fathomed. I always go and look at him before I go to bed; and, wicked little thing, he will wake sometimes.'

'Of course he will, Lady Mallandaine, if you kiss him; and you know you do,' laughed Roland.

'Don't laugh at me, Mr. Dance,' replied Cecile, blushing. 'A mother has a right to be proud of her child, especially such a boy as Bertie.'

'Yes, indeed,' returned Roland, gravely. 'It can't be said to be a weakness of mothers in these days.'

'Ah, you men; you always sneer at us. I don't suppose I differ much from other mothers;' and Cecile looked curiously into Dance's face—wondering, indeed, whether she was more foolish about her child than the matrons of her class were wont to be.

'You wrong me, Lady Mallandaine. It would be better, I think, if mothers in these days were more like you. But it is getting

time to take our places to witness Miss Remington's triumph. I know she will be a success. She can do, I am sure, everything but one, and that one the thing I have set my heart on.'

'And that is?' said Cecile, her eyes dancing with fun, and much mirthful interrogation in her brows.

'Like Alec Merriott!'

'Ah, Mr. Dance, if I was a friend of his, I think I'd tell him not quite to despond.'

'What do you mean? do you think ——'

'Nothing, except that I never saw Lia look so pretty as she does to-night.'

'Lady Mallandaine,' suddenly exclaimed a voice by her side, will you allow me to introduce you to Mr. De Vitre?' and without more circumlocution, Mrs. Remington presented De Vitre to Cecile.

It may seem odd that a man about London like De Vitre should never before have even seen Lady Mallandaine, a beauty who had been much talked about in her first

season. But there are a good many sets in the ramifications of that London world even amongst those who are within the pale. It so happened that De Vitre had been abroad during Cecile's first season, and, as we all know, you must be notorious in some way to be talked of for two seasons in succession. Cecile had not so distinguished herself. De Vitre lived chiefly in one of the fastest sets in London. Sir Hervey moved in a much quieter circle of *viveurs*, who took their pleasure not only more sedately but with, perhaps, a little more propriety. It was the first time that De Vitre had ever penetrated to the mansion of the Remingtons. Why he had come, he could hardly have told, but there is undoubted fatality in these cases. Lounging, bored and listless, against the door, his eye was suddenly caught by Cecile's animated face, as she conversed with Dance. He gazed for a moment. 'My God! how like!' he muttered, and then, turning to the first acquaintance who came to hand, he asked

the name of that pretty fair woman with a white camellia in her hair.

'Lady Mallandaine, of course,' replied the interrogated. 'What bosh, De Vitre; your affecting not to know her by sight.'

'I don't affect,' retorted Ernest; 'nobody, with moderate ability, does after five-and-twenty. I simply never saw her before.'

The interrogated looked unbelief, but he was not going to be drawn into an exchange of passes with Ernest De Vitre, reputed cunning of fence and bitter in the tongue through most club smoking-rooms. He disbelieved, and went his way—safest end to such converse mostly. Better, perchance, were such reticence more often put in practice than it is, and there would be saving of much circulation of verjuice through the human system generally.

It was, of course, easy enough for De Vitre then to get presented to Cecile; and hence the introduction we have witnessed.

Struck by the likeness between hers and

that other face which Wyndham Gwynne's letter of some months back had once more conjured up so vividly to his memory, De Vitre had made up his mind to know Lady Mallandaine. It was not difficult, of course, for a man of his *savoir vivre* to manœuvre himself into the seat next her to witness the theatricals. When he chose to take the trouble, De Vitre could talk well upon most subjects. He exerted himself to-night. A quick judge of character, he saw rapidly that the sneering cynicism he most affected would be distasteful to Cecile. Not a shade of it tinged his discourse. He saw that she had much enthusiasm upon many things at which he habitually scoffed. He drew her out upon these points, just differing sufficiently with her to evoke animated defence of her views thereon. Small cause for wonder that Lady Mallandaine found him agreeable, or that Roland Dance, who sat on the other side of her, was lost in bewilderment at the honeyed change in the usual gall of

De Vitre's nature Dance had often met him before, and was well aware what bitter words about men and things his lips were wont to distil. True, his manner to women was usually suave and caressing, but at times he would attack their pet hobbies with merciless sarcasm. In general, no criticism would have been more acrid than his on such occasion as the present. To-night he was lenient, and disposed to make allowances for everyone and everything.

No need for us to follow the comedy through all its phases; we will content ourselves with such results as affect the characters in whom we are interested. Lia Mallandaine displayed undoubted talent. She looked charming, and acted with great grace and *esprit.* Alec Merriott was undoubtedly not a success, although he was better, perhaps, than from what we already know might have been predicted. It was quite evident that he was very nervous, and in the crack love scene with Miss Remington almost

painfully so. Still the severe coaching of the illustrious Puffin, and thorough knowledge of his words, saved him from coming utterly to grief. Stiff he was very, and painfully conscious of failure himself. It was a performance on which his best friends could hardly congratulate him.

'Made an awful exhibition of myself, Ro,' he remarked to that gentleman at supper. 'If it hadn't been for Puffin, should never have pulled through. Ass I was to be led into it at all; wouldn't take any money to go through it again. Lia in an awful rage with me, no doubt. Fancy she'll admit the intellectual's not my line in future.'

'Bosh,' replied his *fidus Achates*; 'a man may not be an actor, but it's no *sequitur* that he's a fool.'

'You're a Job's comforter,' retorted Alec. 'It is to be hoped there's a medium; one may not have great talent and still not be an idiot, I presume?'

'True, O king; pass the champagne. A

man may have a great thirst and not be a drunkard.'

In the lower regions also critical conversation goes on about the doings of the night.

'Your maistare, Monsieur Bouttare, he not very good actor, I tink,' says Suzanne; 'he want *verve*, he get frightened, nervous, hein?'

'Not likely we could afford to spend much time over such tomfoolery, Maamzelle. We've such lots of other things to think of,' returned Butters, grimly. He also was dimly conscious that his master had not distinguished himself.

'Ah, but you see; he very fond of Mademoiselle Lydia. There was one great lofe scene in his *rôle*. He no make de most of dat. It was one great opportunity. You English stupid, I tink; you no make de most of de opportunity;' and Suzanne favoured her admirer with a most coquettish and provocative smile.

'Damme,' retorted Butters, sulkily, 'that's all you womankind ever think of—love-making. Do you suppose a man ain't nothing else to look to than that?'

'Noting half so nice, I know,' laughed the Frenchwoman, with a saucy toss of her head. 'It's what de men of all nations come to, *mon cher*, soonest or latest. Ah, you—you begin late; all de worse for you, Monsieur Bouttare;' and the soubrette never looked prettier or wickeder than as she spoke, her black eyes sparkling and her white teeth gleaming between her laughing lips.

Joe's sulkiness rather melted before the charms of his enchantress.

'I say, Suzanne,' he remarked, edging towards her, 'I s'pose you began early?'

'*Mon Dieu!* yes; we begin very early—in de cradle in my country.'

'Well, as I don't understand it, perhaps you'll give me a lesson?'

'You no want dat; you men find all dat

out for yourselves very quick when you want to learn;' and Suzanne toyed coquettishly with her apron.

'Yes, but I'm only a beginner,' said the insinuating Joe, as he stole an arm round her waist.

'You a very apt scholar, I tink, Monsieur Bouttare,' rejoined Suzanne, laughing. '*Mon Dieu!* dere is somebody coming,' and slipping from his embrace, the soubrette glided to the door. There she paused for a moment, and turning, observed, 'You must not get on too quick with your alphabet, Monsieur. Good night.'

'They are all gone now, Cecile,' exclaimed Lia, as she ushered her friend into her boudoir. 'I've been dying to speak to you all night. How did it go? What did you think of me?'

'You were simply charming—everyone said so. It all went well. Captain Merriott not quite so successful as one could have wished, but it all——'

'Ah, poor Alec,' interrupted Lia, 'he got stage-fright shockingly. I'm so sorry for him. I wanted to see him afterwards, but never could; he never came near me, and his acting was all my doing. He never would have dreamt of it if I had not persuaded him.'

'I thought he seemed nervous.'

'Nervous! You know the sentimental scene I have with him. Although the stage directions lay down "love-making *ad libitum*," he was so nervous, my dear, that he didn't even kiss me.'

'Ah, you'll never forgive that,' returned Cecile, laughing. 'So nice as you looked too, Lia, it was too bad of him.'

'Don't laugh; I'm dreadfully annoyed about it,' replied Miss Remington.

'What, not being kissed!' exclaimed Lady Mallandaine. 'Bertie was right, Lia, and you were very naughty that day at Childerley, or Captain Merriott would have done better.'

'Don't be provoking, Cecile; you know what I mean.'

'Better than you, my dear, I fancy; but it's dreadfully late. I must really say good night, Lia. The carriage has been round this half hour or more;' and Lady Mallandaine departed.

CHAPTER VII.

'BERTIE ON THE DRAMA.'

It is the morning after the theatricals. Cecile is breakfasting in her own boudoir, for Sir Hervey, not given to late hours, unless the House demands him, has consummated that meal some hours previously. But he never interferes with the gaieties of his young wife, and therefore they very frequently during the London season do not breakfast together.

Cecile sits musing over the occurrences of the previous night. She is pondering as to whether Lia is in earnest with regard to Alec Merriott or not. She thinks so. Suddenly the door opens and Master Bertie, with blooming cheeks, rushes into the apartment, pauses a second, and then demurely

seats himself at some distance from his mother.

'Come here, my darling,' cried Cecile.

'No — Mamma's been naughty. Bertie only comes to her when she's good.'

'How so, my child?'

'Mamma said she would come and see me last night, and she didn't.'

'I got home so late, Bertie, dear; but I did come and see you, and you were sleeping so nicely I didn't like to awake you.'

'But you said you would, Mamma, you know, and tell me all about Lia. Mamma shouldn't tell stories to Bertie.'

'Come here, darling, and hear about it now.'

'No,' replied the boy, holding out after the manner of children at times, though his face betokened eager curiosity. The little cheeks were flushed, and the blue eyes, so like his mother's, sparkling.

'You wicked little thing, come here and make it up with Mamma;' and springing from

her seat Cecile rushed across the room, and catching her boy in her arms, bore him back to her own chair.

'Now, Bert, my pet,' she said, when she had got him comfortably established on her own lap, 'be good, and I'll tell you all about it. What do you want to know, darling?'

'Was it nice?'

'Yes; so nice, like a scene out of fairy land; and Lia looked just like the princess I told you about the other day, you know.'

'And was there a naughty prince, who wanted to lock her up and marry her?' enquired the boy, eagerly.

'Yes; and then there was the good prince who came and conquered the naughty prince, Bertie, and took her away in the end.'

'Were there any giants, Mamma?'

'No, dear, there were not any giants.'

'Couldn't have been nice, Mamma, without giants,' said Bertie, decisively; 'unless,' he continued meditatively, 'there were dwarfs.'

'No there were no dwarfs, either.'

'What did the good prince feed Lia on?' enquired the boy, with a child's practical curiosity concerning eating and drinking.

'I don't quite recollect,' said Cecile, slowly. She had not the talent for improvising fairy tales which distinguished Miss Remington.

'Lia always makes the good prince feed the princess on bread and honey and sugar-plums,' said the boy, authoritatively, 'and the bad one gives her black-beetles and spiders. Didn't the good prince give Lia her tea?'

'No, darling,' replied Cecile, kissing him and laughing.

'I don't think it could have been at all nice, Mamma; and Lia said she would send me some of the sugar-plums the good prince was to give her. Did she?'

'No; perhaps she means to bring them herself to-day. Poor Lia was so tired last night, I think she forgot.'

'Lia never forgets,' retorted the boy, whose faith in, and love for, Miss Remington

were unbounded. 'He wasn't a good prince and never gave her any. Oh, were there any fairies, Mamma?'

'No, my child, there were a great many very pretty women, and a beautiful supper after it was all over.'

'I don't think it could have been a nice play,' said the boy, meditatively, 'with no giants and no dwarfs and no fairies, and a good prince who had no bread and honey nor sugar-plums. He might as well have been a bad prince, you know. Anyone can get black-beetles and spiders.'

A light tap at the door, and ere the intruder is well over the threshold, Bertie springs from his mother's lap, exclaiming, 'Papa, with goodies and kisses for Bertie.'

'Yes, Papa,' replies Sir Hervey, as he catches the boy in his arms, 'with lots of kisses, and nothing else for his boy this morning. 'Good morning, Cecile.'

'Bertie only wants kisses from Papa,' said the child. 'You never came to see me all yesterday.'

'Too busy, child. Left Mamma to take care of you. Had you a pleasant evening, Cecile?'

'Yes,' returned Lady Mallandaine. Lia was a great success, and the whole thing went off very well. Alec Merriott not quite so good as we could have wished, but on the whole there was no fault to be found. You little Turk,' she said, rising, and addressing her boy, 'you like Papa best, you know you do.'

'I don't see him so often as I do you, Mamma; but I like you too,' replied the boy from his father's arms.

'I am almost jealous of you, Hervey,' said Cecile, 'when I see how fond he is of you.'

'No cause, I think. He requires my stern discipline at times to counteract the effects of your spoiling.'

'My spoiling, indeed,' laughed Lady Mallandaine. 'It's a very good match between us; but if one is worse than the other, it's you. Bertie, my child, you must be sent to

a severe school, where there are no fairies nor princesses, only ogres.'

'Bertie won't go. Papa won't let him,' replied the boy, nodding his head confidently.

'Papa must do what Mamma thinks right,' said Sir Hervey, laughing. 'Jump down, child; I want to talk to her. There, you little imp,' he continued, kissing him, 'away with you. Cecile, I want a dinner-party next week. Will you make it up?'

'Of course; who do you want in particular? I should like the Remingtons and Alec Merriott, if you don't mind. Now, who else?'

'I must ask Egerton Slane; he's *the* man in the present crisis. Babbington too, I should like you to put down; and ask young Sir Alberic Hungerford; he's a schoolboy almost now, but, if he can take up his position, will be somebody in the future.'

'Will you be quiet, Bertie; you're tearing my dress. What's the matter, child?

'I don't like Mr. Babbington, Mamma—don't have him here.'

'Hold your tongue, you little monkey. Mr. Slane will be nice, Hervey, and I suppose you want Mr. Babbington, or else Lia can't bear him, and I think him rather heavy myself.'

'Yes, you must ask him, although I rather agree with you, Cecile, he is not of much use to a dinner-party.'

Not a bad-looking man Sir Hervey, as he lounges with his back to the fire, talking to his fair young wife. His hair is heavily shot with grey, and thinning a bit at the top, but he wears well, and is hale and hearty, though verging on the finish of his ninth lustre. And a pretty picture he looks down upon. Cecile, buried in the depths of a low dark velvet-covered lounging-chair, which makes an admirable foil to her fair hair and delicate complexion, with Bertie once more established in her lap, is a bit of domestic portraiture sweet to gaze upon. And so

thinks her husband as his eyes rest upon her.

'Then you will manage it all.' 'Ah!' he exclaimed, as the door was again thrown open and Miss Remington made her appearance, 'congratulations, Lia, on your triumph. I feel as if I was welcoming Thalia *in propria persona*.'

Miss Remington swept him a stage curtsy of surpassing stateliness. 'Thalia makes her acknowledgments, Sir Hervey,' she said, as she shook hands with him, 'but can hardly forgive your not being present to welcome her success.'

'I couldn't get away from the House, indeed.'

'House!' cried Lia. 'Don't attempt to excuse yourself—thinking of the interests of the country before my *début*. Passing musty old Bills while I was making my first curtsy to the British public. Sir Hervey, I don't think I shall ever get over it.'

'Ah, there were plenty of younger critics

whose praises were better worth having than mine. But I must be off. Once more, Lia, accept my congratulations and adieux.' And the baronet departed.

Miss Remington for the next quarter of an hour became Bertie's property. The child had so many questions to put concerning this lamentable decadence of the drama. How Lia could have allowed herself to be concerned in a 'make-believe thing,' as he termed it, in which there figured neither giant, dwarf, nor fairy. On the subject of sugar-plums he was certainly appeased, as Miss Remington produced a satisfactorily filled *bonbonnière*, which, with some disregard for veracity, she affirmed had been given her by the good prince.

'There, come away, darling,' said Lady Mallandaine, at length, 'I am sure Lia's had enough of you for the present.'

'No, Lia's never tired of me, Mamma; are you Lia?' replied Bertie, with all the egoism of childhood.

'Let him stay, Cecile. Bert and I always get on together. Don't we, my boy?'

'Yes, when you do what I want you, and are good.'

But Master Bertie's reign was over. The autocrat of his young life appeared in the shape of his nurse, and summoned him to his own special regions. He was a sweet-tempered child, but ran considerable risk of being spoiled. But his nurse, a quiet, middle-aged woman, ruled him with a firm but steady hand, and Bertie knew that with her there was no trifling. Cecile, quite conscious of her own weakness regarding the boy, and knowing that the woman was much attached to him, had had the good sense never to interfere when she exerted her authority; so Bertie made his exit quietly.

'Now, Cecile,' exclaimed Miss Remington, 'I am going to have a regular gossip with you. First and foremost, what did you mean by what you said last night? Do you think I am really in love with Alec?'

'Begins to look a little like it, my dear,' returned Lady Mallandaine, smiling.

'Well, you're wrong, because I'm not. I like him, and that's all. I have had flirtations, I'll admit, before; shall have probably again. That's very different from being in earnest—not the love we pictured to ourselves when we were girls together, Cecile.'

'Listen a moment, Lia. You admit you like him. Last night you were full of pity for his failure. You don't recognise it yet, but you'll wind up by loving Alec Merriott in sober earnest, that's my belief; and, what's more, I think it would be a good thing for you.'

'I shall do nothing of the kind,' retorted Miss Remington, somewhat curtly. 'I have formed my own idea of a lover, and feel that he must be one whom I could look up to, as I told you at Childerley. Alec don't happen to fulfil that condition.'

'Perhaps not,' replied Lady Mallandaine,

in a dreamy tone. 'But when you love you're certain to do that. Woman invests her lover always with attributes that he probably don't possess.'

'You are talking nonsense, Cecile—talking of what you don't understand. Don't think me unkind, dearest; but your own marriage, though a very happy one, you know, was not a love match. You are very fond of Sir Hervey now, no doubt, but you've never been in love, Cecile.'

'Havn't I?' said Lady Mallandaine, as a faint blush suffused her delicate cheeks; 'there you are wrong.'

Miss Remington gazed at her companion with open eyes. She knew that Cecile had been married almost as a school-girl. She had been extremely intimate with her ever since, and had never heard her name coupled with that of anyone, even in the most desultory way. She said nothing, but waited breathlessly for further revelations.

'Shall I tell you all about it, Lia?' said

Lady Mallandaine, after a pause of some seconds, almost amounting to minutes. 'It is all over long ago now, and I like Hervey, and there can be no harm in it. Years have passed since I have seen him; and, besides, I don't know, or even think, that he ever cared anything for me. It was my cousin Wyndham Gwynne,' she continued, almost in a whisper. 'I was but a school-girl in those days, not sixteen, and he came down and stayed with us. It was soon after the Crimea, and he had distinguished himself much there. His name was in more than one despatch. More than one story had come home to us through his people of his deeds of "derring-do" in those times. Well,' she went on, with a faint smile, 'he came, saw, and conquered. Child as I was then, living a rather isolated life, I had pictured him a hero in my mind before I saw him. You know what that means, Lia, at that age?'

Miss Remington nodded assent.

'And he looked it,' continued Cecile, with

enthusiasm. 'Fancy a tall, dark, good-looking, bronze-bearded man of eight-and-twenty, and you have a picture of my cousin Wyndham as I first saw him. How afraid I was of him to commence with! but he was so kind and gentle that I soon got to know him. He looked upon me, of course, as a mere child; yet how good-natured he was to my girlish whims! He would take any amount of trouble to gratify my school-girl fancies. What wonder I adored him before long? He never knew it, and would, perhaps, have cared little to know it, but Wyndham's occasional visits were elysium to me. What excuses I made to scribble to him. Books, songs, &c. I was always writing to him for; and he was always so good about such things. Then came my poor mother's illness, and Wyndham was present at her death-bed. I can recollect the scene now'—and the tears rolled down Cecile's cheeks as she recalled it. 'I was kneeling by her bedside when she said "good bye" to

him. "I have had a happy and peaceful life, Wyndham," she said, "and am quite resigned to lay it down; but I have sent for you for two things—to wish you good bye and to ask you to be a brother to my girl. You know what little experience my dear husband has of worldly affairs; you know what temptations may assail a child like Cecile. Will you promise, as far as in you lies, to watch over her as your own sister?"

'He was deeply moved, and his reply is graven on my memory.

'"I am very fond of Cecile, aunt. She shall be as a sister to me from this day; as long as I have hand to raise, tongue to use, or a shilling in my purse, Cecile shall never want counsel or protection."

'"Thank you, Wyndham; I knew I could rely upon you. Good bye and God bless you. You have made me very happy."

'And so my cousin went out from the chamber of death. He laid his lips on my poor mother's brow, pressed her hand in

pledge of his good faith, and never saw her more. Do I weary you, Lia?'

'Weary me!' and the tears stood in Miss Remington's eyes as she said so.

'There's not much more to tell now. Of course he was at the funeral, but I was too absorbed in my own grief to think much about him then. I only saw him once more. He came down for one night, and told us he must go to India. He seemed very sad, I thought, but was gentle and kind as ever. He asked me to come out into the garden with him after dinner, and then he recurred to his promise to my mother.

'"You heard what I said, Cecile, at your mother's death-bed. I adopted you then as my sister as solemnly as if you had been born such. I am not one to flinch from my trust. Go to India I must; but in doubt or difficulty write as freely to me as you would were I your brother in reality; and, cost what it may, you will find me at your side should necessity require it."

'What could I say? I know I nearly choked. This man, whom I loved to distraction, was going away for years, and told me to look upon him as a brother. He deemed me a school-girl yet, and never dreamt he had stolen my heart away. What I said now I forget. Some confused promise to write to him often; and so our interview terminated. He left the next day, dropped a light kiss on my cheek as he bade me "good bye," and I, who was quivering with emotion and longed to throw myself into his arms and tell him how I loved him, had to rest content with the observation "that I was a sensitive thing, and cared a great deal more for him than he was worth." The tell-tale tears were in my eyes then, and I cried them nearly out that afternoon. Never so sore a heart had I, Lia, as that day; God forgive me, but not even on the day of my mother's death——'

'Forgive me, Cecile,' said Miss Remington, 'and I thought you had never loved—were

such a happy little thing. But you are that!' and Lia looked almost anxiously into her friend's face.

'Ah, yes,' replied Lady Mallandaine, with a soft smile, 'Hervey's so good to me, and I've got my boy. I couldn't have married him at that time, or for months afterwards; but then you see a year or more had elapsed before he did ask me, and that made a difference. Wyndham and I corresponded—correspond still—but his letters were brotherly ever. I have quite got over it all now; but don't tell me, Lia, dear, again that I havn't had the complaint, and don't know the symptoms.'

'No, I shall never think that again; but you're wrong all the same. I shall never marry Alec Merriott.'

'And I still hold to my opinion,' replied Lady Mallandaine. 'I think you will, and be very happy with him.'

Miss Remington shook her head. 'Why, it must be six years good since you have

seen your cousin?' she remarked, interrogatively.

'Yes, going on for seven. I think now money difficulties had a good deal to do with his going out to India. I meet people occasionally who knew him in those days, and they tell me he exchanged to India because he had lived with so fast a set when at home. He got completely ruined trying to keep pace with them. But if ever sorrow should threaten me, Lia, I should look more to Wyndham for help than to anyone, and I have firm faith that he wouldn't fail me.'

'What, before your husband, Cecile?'

'No, I don't quite mean that,' replied Lady Mallandaine in a low voice; 'but, all the same, I have an instinctive feeling that in time of trouble Wyndham would prove my best friend. I know it is wrong not to rely more on Hervey. I can't help it. I think sometimes I'm a little in awe of him still.'

'Well, I can't say I see any signs of it.'

'No,' said Cecile, laughing, 'I hope not. He don't illtreat his little wife. I'm not beaten in private, if you mean that, Lia. But I have an undefined feeling that he could be very stern about some things. He's a man who can be strongly moved upon occasion, little as you may think it. I have only seen him really angry once, but he frightened me then, angry as I was too. His wrath so utterly swallowed up my smaller indignation that I wound up by interceding for the offender. It was Bertie's first nurse, and she had been guilty of gross negligence —negligence, indeed, that might have cost the child's life. He was inexorable then, stern and relentless. The only time he ever said "No" to me. He wouldn't let me give the poor wretch a character. But here's lunch,' said Lady Mallandaine, as the butler threw open the door, 'and if you're not hungry, I am. Come along.'

CHAPTER VIII.

'A NIGHT AT ALDERSHOTT.'

Down across the wild moorland once more speeds Roland Dance—his destination the "great military dustbin" of England. The army is of course still weeping—chronic state of the army during the spring months. In the summer it melts. In the autumn it growls, grumbles, and has grievances. In the winter it shivers, sneezes, and is dyspeptic, and meditates upon its general ill-treatment. Government considers that halcyon days have dawned for the British army; that the diet of beer, skittles, dust, and low music-halls which it enjoys at Aldershott constitute a paradise, the delights of which should be limited to a select few. Hence Government as far as possible reduces bat-

talions to a minimum. The army is not upon the whole much struck with itself. It has a dim perception that it is becoming a little theatrical in these days; that though it might furnish a tolerably large, if inharmonious, chorus in a *spectacle*, there might be some little difficulty in the organisation of a *corps d'armée* even. What absurdity in the army to doubt its own efficiency, when those in high places are so satisfied with the way it figures—in the Budget.

Roland Dance jumps into his cab at Farnborough. You become conscious there of your insignificance as not belonging to the army. However, his direction to the driver of '—th Lancers' permanent barracks,' restores confidence, and the man mutters grimly, 'Come to join, I s'pose; rather an old 'un;' and speeds on his way. The army is apparently taking its recreation more or less drearily all along the road from the station to the camp. Walking with its young woman, beering itself, or practising march-

ing under adverse circumstances. Roland has come down to dine with his friend Alec Merriott, and either go back or take a shake-down as circumstances may dictate. They always do dictate the shake-down, but one prefers a little uncertainty on such occasions. Still it is as well to have a tooth-brush with one at all events. The mess of the —th is pleasant enough to the stranger within their gates. They're a genial set, rolling merrily enough adown the stream of life. Their dry champagne and cookery are unimpeachable, and the claret as good as is compatible with a wandering cellar. But Dance and Merriott decline the seductive rubber or more noisy pool, and, their refection finished, adjourn to the latter's quarters for a cigar.

'Wanted to have a bit of a talk with you, Ro,' exclaimed the host when they were comfortably ensconced in lounging-chairs and their cigars well under way. 'Must consider the next move in the campaign,

old boy. Regular mistake of mine that theatrical business, you know. But I'm in genuine earnest, and mean to marry Lia Remington. If she hadn't got that whim in her head about a man making his mark in the world, my chance would be good enough, I think. A little stormy, perhaps, when it came to conferring with the old gentleman, but I should pull through at last. I ain't afraid of him, though he'll doubtless think Lia might do better.'

'Never mind, Alec. You certainly weren't quite a success in "holding the mirror up to Nature." I don't want to be rude, but I think your mirror was a trifle cracked, to say nothing of the quicksilver being a little rubbed off at the back. Women will have their whims. Always humour, never thwart them; that's my maxim. The question now, Alec, is, how we're to proceed with your intellectual development. Got any idea yourself?'

Merriott paused ere he replied, and lazily

watched the smoke-wreaths as they rolled round his head. 'Think I shall write a book,' he observed at last. 'Fiction ain't very difficult I should imagine from some of the novels I read, and I can spell. Devil of a grind, I know. Hate writing anything, but then you see I've an object. And, d—n it, I have seen a lot of these things about which people only write.'

Dance gave a low whistle. 'You're flying high,' he remarked at last. 'No one can give an opinion on that subject till he's seen you try. The art of composition is not acquired in a day. As you say, you've seen plenty, if you can only put it down and string it together. Look here, what sort of memory have you got—pretty good?'

Merriott nodded.

'Cram, Sir; confound it all, that's the game. Women's knowledge is always shallow. I don't suppose Miss Remington is any exception to the general rule. Mug, Alec, as if you were grinding for a commis-

sion, and then let loose the flood-gates of your intelligence on her. Deuced deal easier, old man, than writing a novel, which, to say the least of it, is a very dubious experiment.'

Alec smiled as he retorted, 'It wouldn't do; she'd find me out to a moral, Ro; besides, I don't quite want to win Lia under false colours. No, I'll go in for a book, I think.'

'"God is great, and Mahomet is His prophet." You'd better begin right off the reel, because this next intellectual development will take time, you know. Of course I shall read it. I'm quite aware friendship has its duties. I shan't flinch. Like the hollow and unsympathising world, I shall read it, and probably d—n it.'

'Can't say you're encouraging. Never mind, I shall do it; I feel I've all the—what do you call it—oh, germs of genius in me.'

'It's a remarkable fact,' observed Dance, addressing the moderator lamp, 'but that's what they all say before they begin. I daresay they're right. Only the germs, somehow,

don't germinate and fructify. My dear Alec, I'm not going to say another word, except to wish you luck. A man who has conceived a passion for the ink-bottle is no more to be checked than one who has yielded to the attractions of strong waters. You have this pull: you don't take it out of your constitution in the same way, and it cures itself if necessary.'

The two smoked on in silence, both pondering on the same subject, as to whether Alec Merriott can write a book. 'Shouldn't think so,' muses Dance, 'but then men I should never have credited with that ability have, and done it well too.'

The big camp is hushed. The 'last post' has long since sounded. The hoarse challenging of the sentries or the occasional rattling of cabs alone break the stillness of the night. Lights faintly gleam here and there through well-curtained mess-room windows, from the interior of which comes the low hum of conversation and laughter. The

camp church glistens in the moonlight, its natural deformity a trifle softened. The pall of night has fallen over the great cantonment. 'God's lock,' as Bacon calls it, is upon it. Suddenly, the shrill shriek of a bugle penetrates Alec Merriott's quarters. He listens for a moment; then, springing to his feet, exclaims, 'The alarm, by Jove! What the devil's the row, I wonder?'

'Telegraph from Portsmouth to say somebody's calling from the Continent,' said Dance, as Alec threw up the window.

'Fire! fire! Guard turn out!' came in sonorous tones through the open casement, mixed with the shrill cries of the bugles. 'Jove, there go our trumpets,' said Alec, as their still shriller voice fell upon his ear. 'Ro, my boy, you're in luck. We've got up a sensation for you. Off with your dress clothes, tumble into that monkey-jacket of mine, and come and see the soldiers put out a fire. All right, Butters,' he exclaimed, as that worthy made his appearance; 'I heard

the "assembly;" where is it? Here, give me my boots and jacket.'

'Fourth Hussar stables, Mr. Alec, and a very tidy blaze it are too,' responded that functionary, as he complied with his master's requirements. 'It's up their infirmary way, and they've a good bit of loose straw lying about.'

'All right; come along, Ro,' and Merriott hurried down the stairs to join his men.

Down the hill came the infantry pickets, in their grey great coats, with steady tramp, at the double, in silence unbroken, except for the quick sharp authoritative 'Steady there; not too fast; keep your ranks, men!' from the officers, and, crossing the main road of the permanent barracks, disappear in the direction of the fire. The flames begin to shoot up now hungry and ravenous for fresh food. The fire king is abroad, although not as yet in the plenitude of his power. Quick rattling of wheels in many directions falls on the ear, as the various camp engines, drawn

by the soldiers, come racing to the spot; for the army regard a fire much as a New York fire brigade would—that is, as a species of intoxicating amusement.

The —th Lancers are formed up on parade, but a few minutes after Merriott arrived there, and he finds little difficulty in attaching himself to the contingent destined to combat with the conflagration, which moves off at the double.

'Come on, Ro, and see the fun; they'll soon get the best of it, no doubt; but there will be trouble probably about getting some of the sick horses through the flames if it's bad, as they say; and if you never heard a horse shriek in its agony you may this night, and if you do you'll never forget it nor wish to hear it again. I hope, poor brutes, they'll all escape. At all events, our men are more likely to be of use there than the infantry.'

Like an ants' nest when intruded upon, the great hive is all alive—swarming out from its various cells to the point of attack. The

horses have been mostly got out by the time Merriott's party reach the scene. The last few come out, trembling and shivering with fright, handkerchiefs and cloths bound over their eyes, and even then needing cruel punishment to make the poor panic-stricken brutes evade the fiery winding-sheet that threatens them. Steadily worked the engines under the practised hands that guide them, while the pickets form a chain of sentries round the precincts of the fire, letting no one within their enclosure except the actual workers. The lurid light glares down upon hundreds of white upturned faces. Swish, swash, go the engines, in steady response to the dull thud of the pumps. The men work in the wrapped silence of discipline. A few low muttered comments, and the brief authoritative word of command alone break the stillness of the night—still, but for the sharp cracking and roaring of the flames.

'That place and the next are gone,' says

an Engineer officer, as he passes, to Alec's muttered interrogatory; 'but we shall stop it there. No great harm done; horses, poor brutes, all got out. Only the loss of a few stables and some straw.'

The words have barely passed his lips ere a piercing shriek rings through the night air, and at the window of a straw-loft over the blazing stables appears the figure of a woman. An unkempt slovenly poor creature, with dishevelled hair and bedraggled dress, her eye-balls glaring with terror, her voice uplifted in her agony. One of those poor parasites of a camp that drag through their miserable existence as they best may, preaching in their wretched lives a more bitter homily against vice than the lips of the most eloquent can give vent to. Still, poor woman, a fragment of humanity—fragment indeed in much danger of incremation at this present.

'Ladders! where are the ladders?' 'Here!' and 'here!' is the quick response in two or

three places. 'Forward! that party on the left; steady! the remainder. Forward at the double, —th Lancers!' shouts Alec; and he and his party dash forward. Twice the flames hiss out so fiercely that the soldiers recoil; but the engines have been turned upon that spot, and for a few seconds succeed in wrestling with the flames for the ascendency. The third time the ladder is planted—it reaches well to the window, but the water has caused so much smoke by this that hardly has it touched the sill before its summit is enveloped and obscured. A dozen willing hands hold the foot, and desperately through the smoke Alec dashes up. Choked, blinded, he feels his way rung by rung. As he nears the top his brain swims, the blood surges hotly to his temples, his head feels as if splitting—mechanically he yields and commences to descend. Ere he has got above half-way back, the grasp of his hand slackens, his head drops, and, wet, begrimed, and senseless, Alec falls back into

the arms of his own men. Again the flames shoot up wildly, dispersing the dark smoke. For a second, at that window a woman tosses her arms in wild despair, and one more agonized shriek rises above the crackling of the flames. The cloud-wreaths of the fire once more close in the horrible picture, and naught but a few calcined bones shall ever again be seen of that lost atom of humanity.

They laid him flat on his back; they dashed water in his face; they loosened his neck-cloth; and after a little Alec showed symptoms of reviving. 'Stand back, my lads,' said the surgeon to the troopers who clustered round their captain. 'Give him air, and he'll do now. Get him to swallow this, if you can,' he continued, handing some strong ammonia to Roland Dance, who was supporting his friend's head—a head much grimed, blackened, and with the fair curly locks thereof somewhat singed to boot. Roland put it to Merriott's lips. The latter

gulped it down with difficulty, coughed, choked, spit a good deal of it out again, raised himself, and looked vaguely round.

'Where am I?' he murmured. Fire within as well as fire without. How she shrieked, poor wretch! I can't see the top, I can't!' and here Alec dropped his head quietly back on Roland's shoulder and closed his eyes.

The surgeon bent over him for a moment, and softly drew back the eyelid. 'He's all right; put him on a stretcher, some of you, and carry him home. The soul, Sir,' he continued, 'has hardly as yet resumed her mortal tenement. He's had a far gaze into the other world—looked up to the gates of death, in fact. But a miss is as good as a mile in cases of asphyxy. Nothing to fear; he'll soon come round. I'll look in presently, but he'll be himself by that.'

The surgeon was right, and by the time they had got Merriott to his own quarters he was partially himself. Rather bruised by his fall; head still rather swimming, it may

be; but he could talk rationally enough to Roland Dance about the event of the night.

'Pooh! I shall do now, Butters,' he observed to that faithful servitor, who was hovering about the room, and had been verily moved to sore tribulation when he saw his master borne in by his own men, all blackened and begrimed, and showing but limited symptoms of vitality. 'Give me a stiff glass of brandy and water now. I'll sleep off the remaining effects of a purl from a ladder before daybreak. Not half such a burster as I got over the hurdles at Corlingford, when that jade, Fanny Flowers, never rose an inch at the last from home.'

'Didn't like the look of you, Alec, when they first brought you back out of the smoke,' said Dance, quietly.

'No; before I got half a dozen steps up that ladder I felt I was choking. Then came the sensation of somebody pressing me down as I groped my way upward, mixed with the thought of that poor shrieking creature I

had last seen above me. It seemed as if at every step I took in that stifling darkness I was raising a ton weight. Then I began to give way and sink under the pressure. I was going down, down, crushed down; and then I recollect no more until it seemed as if I had swallowed the flames.'

'Ah! that was the ammonia we got down your throat.'

'Liquid fire, it seemed; but it warmed me all through, and has brought me round again, though I have some recollection of nearly choking over it, to start with.'

'I say, Alec, grand incident to start your book with,' said Dance, after a slight pause.

'Ah!' replied the other, with a smile; 'but I can't afford to go on picking up incidents after this fashion. Think I'll turn in now. You said the doctor meant to look in. Give him a baccy and something to drink, but don't let him wake me. I feel like doing the sleep of the righteous.'

'Flummery ain't in my line, old fellow;

but you deserve it this night, if anyone does, for your plucky effort to save that unhappy woman. Good night.'

Dance lit a cigar, and smoked meditatively. 'Rum thing,' he mused, 'that fictitious attribute we denominate courage. Here's this man to-night faces the flames to save a waif of humanity he never even saw before, while a few nights back he trembled at facing the footlights in the service of the girl he's madly in love with. Matter of habit, I presume. What's nervous work to one is child's play to another. Blessed, if I don't believe what's called courage is after all nothing better than habitude. A man may have his heart in his mouth standing up to Willsher's bowling, who'd ride a hard-puller cool enough at Becher's Brook in the Liverpool. I've often heard it remarked by these soldiers that artillerymen are more careless regarding powder than other men—more apt to smoke pipes in magazines, and so on. Bah! I believe that's the case—"familiarity breeds

contempt"—and we christen it courage. Hum! flaw here in the argument, rather. Don't think Alec ever did fire-brigade work before. Still, as Egerton Slane lays down, "life without speculation is a blank. If you won't do it morally, intellectually, politically, or scientifically, there remain but the Stock Exchange and the turf to prevent you assuming the cabbage formation."'

The arrival of the doctor here broke in upon Roland's meditations. He listened to Dance's report. 'What I prognosticated,' he observed; 'he is quite right—he don't want to see me or I him. Nature and a good night's rest will do more for him than I or anyone else could. Thanks; yes, I will have a cigar. How that miserable woman got over those stables, Heaven only knows. Of course she'd no business in that place. Smuggled there by some of the men, I presume. Tremendous monarch to view in the majesty of his power, the fire-king, is he not? I have stood almost transfixed with

awe, and seen six hundred houses licked up by the flames in the space of a few hours. That was in the suburb of a town on the American continent. Wooden tenements, and nothing but the brick chimneys to point out where some four thousand people had been previously living as the sun went down. I was once, in India, witness of a tent catching fire, and that really was as comic an incident as ever I saw. Somebody put a candle too close to the canvas. It blazed up as a newspaper might. We tumbled head over heels out of it, and in something like five minutes a couple of charred tent poles were all that marked where our late habitation had stood. But I must be off—good night;' and the voluble doctor departed.

'Queer thing,' mused Dance, as he smoked on, 'the great war between these two powers that rule this world of ours—fire and water—ever combating, ever struggling. Warfare of eternity, the *savants* tell us. Now one obtaining a slight advantage, now the

other. Any very decided preponderance either way, and the destruction of our earth not imminent but assured, and the vexed question 'twixt the Neptunists and the Plutonists at rest for ever—whether the end of all things shall be by fire or by water. Hum! I am due at unearthly hours tomorrow morning. Oh, dear! this is what comes of running down for a quiet dinner at Aldershott. Never no more for this child.'

'Good bye, Butters,' said Dance, as at an early hour next morning he took his departure. 'You're master'll do now, if you can keep him out of assisting at further conflagrations.'

'That's where it is, Mr. Dance. Let'em run in their class, I sais,' responded that worthy. 'When a man's clearly bred to shoot pigeons, and for the steeplechasing and cricketing line of business, wots he want going up ladders and mixing hisself up in fires and theaytricals for? It's going clear agin Providence, damme.'

CHAPTER IX.

'LIA'S MEDITATIONS.'

> Oh wad some power the giftie gie us,
> To see ourselves as others see us!

SANG one of the greatest of our songsters some eighty and odd years ago. Ah, me! but I think it is as well not. What miserable, mean, despicable bipeds we should strip when the quill feathers of our self-esteem were thus rudely plucked from us! Fancy, my argumentative friend, when, after twenty minutes of windy platitude and claptrap, you go your way exulting that you have at last thoroughly convinced me of the errors and darkness of my understanding —fancy, I say, you're knowing, in the plain vernacular, that I have but deemed you a man of much verbiage and vociferation,

succumbing simply to your oratorical efforts from sheer boredom and weariness; that you have aroused the very indolence of my nature into fiercest contention, and that I would vote diametrically in opposition to all previous convictions to avenge that *mauvais quart d'heure* you occasioned me in the pleasaunce not a month back—think, I say, of your knowing all this.

'See ourselves as others see us!' God forbid! There would be an end to marriage and giving in marriage. There would be an end to enterprise, an end—why go on? Could we but know how our compeers estimate us, how many of us would ever have heart to try anything really in earnest? Self-esteem — stigmatised, I know, by all sorts of cruel names—vanity, conceit, and a hundred more. Cling to it. Heed not the voices of your circle; boldly proclaim that your lights are more brilliant than theirs. Mankind are loth always, till the matter is past dispute, to admit that he whom they

meet habitually has soared beyond them. Not a weak point in his character, then, that is not paraded and dwelt upon.

'See ourselves as others see us!' Once more, I say, Heaven forfend! To those who have common sense, introspection must be quite punishment enough. Why pull the tails of society's peacocks before their time —that time that so assuredly awaits them as each decade in our ever-moving, ever-excitable age so steadily shows? The stars in the world of modern idolatry culminate quickly. The planets of a few years back—where are they?

You may have read—it is more in fashion in these days to say, 'of course, you know'—a fashion which Dickens has so pleasantly satirised in his 'Mr. Barlow' paper. Still, you may have read Xavier De Maistre's great chapter about mirrors. Whether you have or no, he says therein: 'Alas! it is seldom that deformity acknowledges itself, and breaks the glass.' How can one agree with him, unless a

maker of mirrors? and though a temporary demand for that article might follow, it would most undoubtedly drop out of request if 'we saw ourselves as others see us.' But though he may moralise on the point, he eventually, in the happiest language, puts the practical result of a peep in the glass before us: 'At the moment when the reflection reaches our eyes, and when we are clearly depicted such as we are, the shadow of our self-esteem glides between, and presents to us a divinity.'

Far better so! Much more to our advantage and future well-doing that we should believe that there is better stuff in us, than that the awful looking-glass Burns hinted at should be held before us. It is not that I do not think that there are brave, true, honest striving hearts in this world; but it is well for them that their energies should not be paralysed at the outset by hearing the hum of the drones. As Mr. Helps hath it, 'what the spotted snakes said' is a thing to be much contemned;

yet the 'spotted snakes' carry much weight in society.

Lia Remington sits in front of her mirror and regards her bright face with pardonable complacency, while Suzanne brushes out the dusk tresses that reach to her mistress's waist. A frank, free, honest-hearted girl is Lia. Quick-witted and keenly alive to her position as one of the *parvenues* of society, ever on the alert in that respect, she is extremely sensitive to any slight or impertinence that may be put upon her parents. Fully aware of their separate foibles—of her mother's absurd veneration for rank and fashion, of her father's equally ludicrous idolatry of Mammon—it is not very safe to play upon either of these weaknesses in Miss Remington's hearing. She has a sharp tongue of her own when she chooses, and in more than one instance has she descended heavily on the offender in this respect, and made him somewhat repent of his malicious pleasantry. People intimate with the

Remingtons are cautious regarding the exercise of such humour in the daughter's hearing, albeit the mounting of Mrs. Remington on her favourite hobby is decidedly tempting.

Lia just now is thinking how very odd it is that she has not set eyes on Alec Merriott since the theatricals, now a little over a week ago. He had been intimate with them for some time, and of late had been so very much about their house. Of course she knew that he was one of her most devoted admirers, and only wanted the slightest encouragement to declare himself such. Well, he had almost done that, as it was; but she knew at a sign from her that Alec would ask to be all in all to her. Now this was just what Miss Remington wished to avoid. She was fond of him in a way. She liked dancing with him; preferred him as her cavalier to anyone else; would have sooner lost any dangler in her train than Merriott; but she did not want to marry him. She told

Lady Mallandaine the truth, when she said she liked him but did not love him. Wise in her generation and clever of fence was Lia, and she had need to be. Alec was no novice in Cupid's arena, and Miss Remington had been hard put to it more than once to prevent the *éclaircissement* she so deprecated. That of course would completely put an end to existing relations between them. But that not having come to pass, Alec's desertion was a cause of much meditation to Lia. She missed him greatly. No woman likes the escape of an admirer from her meshes, even when she is perfectly indifferent to him. She would still have him burn incense and sacrifice at her altar. But when he is a favoured adorer, the thing becomes serious. It certainly was true that she acquitted him of having relapsed into paganism and of kneeling at the shrine of a new divinity. But what had become of him? Stationed at Aldershott, which was the same thing as living at Chelsea or Bayswater, what did he

mean by not coming near her for more than a week? Before the theatricals, he had appeared at the house on some pretence or another five days out of the seven, on an average—dining, lunching, calling, afternoon tea, or whatever it might be. Lia knit her brows, and then laughed at herself as the mirror threw back the expression. 'Captain Merriott,' she thought, 'there is what you military men term "a wigging" due to and awaiting you in Eaton Square.'

'There, that will do, Suzanne; put my hair up quick, now. I'm awfully late as it is. Is my mother down, do you know?'

'*Oui*, Mademoiselle. I tink so by dis. Madame rang for Mathilde some time back. Monsieur *votre père*, him breakfast early and depart some hour ago.'

Lia's glossy tresses were soon coiled round her pretty head by the deft fingers of the Frenchwoman, and her toilette brought to a speedy conclusion.

'Good morning, my mother,' exclaimed

Miss Remington, as she entered the breakfast-room and disturbed her venerated parent in the perusal of the 'Morning Post.' 'Shockingly' late, I'm afraid, as usual. Have you begun breakfast?'

'No, Lia; I waited for you, and amused myself with the paper. I've not been down very long.'

I will not say that the 'Morning Post' stood to Mrs. Remington in the light of the Scriptures, but it is certain that the veneration with which that lady regarded that and its companion, the 'Court Journal,' was intense. She read them with belief and enthusiasm. They were to her the veritable chronicles of that world she so burned to be identified with—indeed, in some measure was. But the good lady's ambitions were boundless. She knew that she was not quite as yet of the elect. She mingled but sparingly with coronets so far, and kenned not the circle of the Court. Still she hoped to compass her dreams in due course. Mrs.

Remington's theatricals, Mrs. Remington's dinners, Mrs. Remington's balls, &c., were all duly notified in the journalistic history of the country. With gold galore and a butler understanding of his business, it would be hard if they were not. The upper rungs of society's ladder might be attained in time. Her husband to a considerable extent shared her weakness in this respect. Worshipper of Mammon, he might be; but to do him justice, he was lavish of his wealth, and to choose a son-in-law between strawberry leaves encircling the brow and a man whose cheque was good for a million, would have made him a pitiable sight to see, recalling forcibly the apologue of the ass 'twixt the two bundles of hay.

'Come along, Mamma; tea is poured out. What have you picked up out of the papers?'

'Nothing much; stop, gracious, listen to this, Lia. "Fire at Aldershott.—The alarm of fire rang out through the camp lines on

Tuesday night, and occasioned the turn out of most of the troops in cantonment. It proved to be merely the ignition of some straw in the vicinity of the infirmary stables of the 4th Hussars. The fire, which for a short time blazed with considerable violence, was soon checked by the exertions of the soldiery, although not before the adjoining stabling had been devoured by the flames. We regret to add that a woman unfortunately perished in the conflagration, in spite of the heroic efforts made to save her by Captain Merriott, of the —th Lancers, who, all but suffocated by the smoke, eventually fell senseless from the ladder he strove to ascend to her rescue. We are glad to add that the gallant officer shortly came to himself again, and has sustained no serious injury from his plucky exertions.'

'Let me look, mother,' said Lia, rising. She took the paper from Mrs. Remington's hand and threw her eye over the paragraph. 'This was Thursday,' she mused. 'Well,

this would account probably for Alec's absence yesterday; but how about his previous defalcation?' It didn't acquit him there one iota. No, the truant still richly deserved the thong when he could be laid hands on.

'How provoking these papers are. Here has Captain Merriott evidently done something to distinguish himself, and they give us no particulars. I shall write to him to-day, mother, to enquire how he is. He don't deserve it, for his behaviour since the theatricals has been simply abominable; he has never come near us.'

'He's afraid of you, perhaps, Lia. You know you were very angry with him that night.'

'Afraid! My dear mother, I wish it were possible to make the men of this generation afraid. No,' she continued, with a little *moue*, 'the only women they are ever really alarmed at are the London hostesses who own pleasant country houses with good

shooting. I have seen them shiver and have recourse to much paltry subterfuge on such occasions as when, the male element proving short, the hostess has determined "that every man that night should do his duty."'

'Well, I am sure I am very sorry we havn't seen him lately. I like Captain Merriott: he knows everybody and tells me everything.'

'He ought to have a good deal to tell next time he calls,' rejoined Miss Remington, with some asperity, 'considering the time he has taken to collect intelligence.'

There were a good many people in the park that afternoon. It was one of those exceptionally warm sunny days that we are occasionally blessed with amid the misery of our English spring. As Mrs. Remington's Victoria progressed leisurely down the rails, Roland Dance raised his hat from inside them. A quick signal from Lia, and then their carriage was instantly stopped. Dance slipped underneath the iron palings, and in

a second was shaking hands at the side of the carriage.

'What is all this story about Captain Merriott and the fire at Aldershott?' enquired Lia. 'Do you know anything about it?'

'I was down there, as it happened, and saw the whole affair. The newspaper paragraph is pretty correct,' returned Roland, quietly. 'I suppose you have seen that?'

'Yes; but tell me all about it. First, how is Captain Merriott?'

'He'll do now; but he didn't look well when they first picked him up at the bottom of the ladder, insensible, scorched, grimed, and blackened.'

'He's not burnt, not badly at least?' said Lia, as her cheeks flushed, speaking in a low, hurried voice.

'No, nothing of any consequence. A bit shook from the asphyxy and the fall, but he'll be all right again in a few days.'

'He behaved very gallantly, did he not?' enquired Lia.

'Yes, Miss Remington. Had you been there, I think you would have owned he'd plenty of nerve in the flames, whatever his deficiencies before the footlights might be. He made a very plucky effort to save a woman, and didn't give in till the smoke proved too much for him. He hadn't much life in him when his men brought him out of the hubbub.'

'Thank you, Mr. Dance. Will you tell him we are very anxious to hear that he has quite got over it all, and that the most satisfactory proof he can give of his recovery will be to let us see him as soon as may be in Eaton Square. Good bye.'

'Lady Mallandaine's right,' mused Roland. 'I don't think Alec need despair in the long run. The colour came into her cheeks when she asked if he was burnt. 'Quite interest enough there to be kindled into something warmer if Alec carefully attends to it. Not a girl to be wooed and won in a hurry; the best of them never are that; but being

wooed they all like, and won they all may be.' And with this comprehensive *résumé* of the fair sex, Dance continued his stroll.

'Cecile now,' thought Miss Remington, as their carriage moved slowly on again, 'I daresay would argue, if she had been here, that my asking after Captain Merriott was testimony that I really feel a greater interest in him than I admit. What nonsense! One may be interested enough in one's acquaintance, I should hope, to feel a little moved at the news of their being nearly burnt to death, and a desire to know how they are under the circumstances. No; Cecile has taken it into her little noddle that I am in love with this man, and nothing will convince her to the contrary until I marry somebody else. Bless me, I don't want to do that any more than I do to marry him. I've no doubt there's a prince laid up for me somewhere. A braw wooer when my time comes. And yet I should make such

a nice old maid, I know I should,' and Lia's face rippled with smiles at the idea.

I don't think she much believed in that view of her life's future.

'Don't you think it time to go home, Lia?' enquired Mrs. Remington. 'What on earth are you laughing at?'

'I was thinking whom I should marry, mother,' replied the girl.

'You must marry a peer,' replied Mrs. Remington, gravely. 'Yes,' she continued, unctuously, 'a peer of the realm.'

'Won't do, mother,' cried Lia, gaily. 'Not half swell enough. Royal blood to some extent I insist on. Home, William.'

CHAPTER X.

'A DINNER IN EATON SQUARE.'

DINE! Yes, we must dine. Dinner in these days of civilisation is an act of sacrificial worship. The gods of modern idolatry are numerous as those of paganism. There is no one fetish of them all, perhaps, commands more impassioned votaries than the table. We bow the knee to Mammon and Venus. We throw chaplets to the high-priestesses of Song. Some of us kneel to Art. Some of us sacrifice to Fortune. But the worshippers of '44 claret, truffles, turtle soup, and cunning *entrées*, are manifold in the land. Of much experience was he who said the way to the heart was through the gastric juices.

But dining is a science, and, considering the years given to its cultivation, still a

backward science. Imperial Rome had made great strides therein, but then came chaos; and in the dark ages there was, I opine, much tearing to pieces of half-cooked flesh and but little cooking. Mediæval times did not much mend matters in this respect, with their barons of beef and oxen roasted whole. Barbecued pig was, I imagine, a dish to shudder at; and the great Elizabeth herself breakfasted on underdone beefsteaks and tankards of spiced ale. But in the latter part of the last century the science of dining made rapid strides. There are dinners and dinners. You may gorge yourself with everything an epicure can mention in the City, and I shall tell you on recapitulation that you have ate, not dined. You are lucky, possessing the wealth of Crœsus, if you accomplish six dinners in the year. A dinner *par excellence* depends on many accessories, principally on five:—The viands, wine, and cookery I lump as one; the room and decoration as another; thirdly, and a very

important one, the guests; fourthly, the host, and if he does not play his *métier* well, the remainder will go for nothing; lastly, *luck*. You shall give the pleasantest and most successful dinner possible. Try it yet another time. You shall have the identical bill of fare again, cooked by the same artist; exactly the same people, and the result shall be unsatisfactory compared with the former banquet. Why so? Because probably some of your guests were not quite 'i' the vein,' the ball of conversation never got happily kicked off, or you perchance made some slight error in society's tactics.

'The pleasures of the table are peculiar to humanity. They suppose all the antecedent cares for the preparation of the repast, for the choice of place, and the assembling of the guests,' quoth Brillat Savarin, a sage who gave much thought to these things. For myself, I would lay much stress on the guests, more than on the cooking. We have

most of us known pleasant dinners over chops and pale ale, and dreary times over champagne and venison.

'Tis not in mortals to command success,
But we'll do more, Sempronius,—we'll deserve it.

A host can but take that for his text.

Do you know that grim jest of Grimod de la Réynière, a noted *bon vivant* in Paris in the early days of this century, who, pretending to be sick for some time, eventually published his death, and then had cards sent to his friends inviting them to attend his funeral? They arrived in many mourning coaches, encountering the hearse at the door. When they were all assembled, the butler, in deep mourning, threw open the dining-room door, with '*Messieurs, vous êtes servis.*' And on entering, they found the head of the table occupied by the supposed defunct, and an excellent dinner spread for his friends *in extremis*. Grimmest gastronomical joke of which I have ever read.

Sir Hervey Mallandaine boasts a good cook,

and his dinners are voted pleasant in the London world. He never overdraws his resources. No attempt to dine more than the room will hold comfortably, or the servants can satisfactorily wait upon, ever takes place in the Mallandaine *ménage*. The well-bred, quiet, sensible master of the house at the bottom, and the bright sunshiny hostess at the top of the table, are in themselves great elements of success. It is difficult not to feel pleased with yourself under the influence of either end of the board. Cecile's fair girlish face is sweet to look upon on such occasions. Some dozen people are at present assembled in that pleasant refectory, around the flower-decked table. There is Egerton Slane, that iconoclast who is ever tilting at what men are wont to hold in esteem, differing with everybody, but withal so whimsically, that he provokes far more mirth than indignation. Just at present he is riding his pet hobby, that our modern civilisation is all a sham—a mere Brum-

magem imitation of that of imperial Rome. 'More merciful, Sir Hervey? not a particle. We care no more for the destruction of human life than did the ancients. You may argue, certainly, that it is more merciful to destroy life by opium and insufficient nourishment in its first year, than to give it to the lions in its prime. It admits of argument, no doubt. But it strikes me that infanticide just now is as much a part of our social system as the games of the arena were that of the Romans.'

Human life—tenderness regarding it! As I pen these lines, we may well bow our heads, and ask if this civilisation we so vaunt is aught but the veriest sham that ever imposed on mankind. When millions are compassing each other's destruction; when the dead are counted by tens of thousands; when the earth is drenched with gore, and the cry of woe and desolation extends over half Europe; when, for years to come, the Continent shall be specked with maimed atoms of humanity;

when the last half of the nineteenth century has already put the butcheries of the first completely in the shade; when, in this very year 1870, the wholesale business of war was prefaced by the most sanguinary massacres in the retail trade of murder that the century can as yet produce—it is meet, I think, we speak but little of our boasted civilisation, nor vaunt much the progress of that religion which preacheth peace and goodwill to all men!

Merriott is seated next Miss Remington. A little audacity on the part of the dragoon, to which the lady had rendered willing assent, had easily forestalled Mr. Babbington's tardy advance in that direction. The stout and eminently respectable Babbington had for some time marked Lia down as a meet and fitting helpmate to assist him in the dispersion of those ingots which his youth had been spent in accumulating. Mr. Remington gave him some mild encouragement in that respect, and had more than once recom-

mended him to his daughter's notice. 'A warm man, my dear. Taken a strong fancy to you, Lia. One could hardly say to what extent Babbington's name in the City is not good. You may go further and fare worse, child.' At all of which Lia laughed merrily, and replied she might have to fall back on him some day. Soldiers Mr. Babbington regarded as an unmitigated curse to the nation. He objected to the expense of a standing army in time of peace, while war was an absurdity no country in these days ought to indulge in. It depreciated securities, and played the deuce with all commerce and business arrangements generally. Therefore Mr. Babbington viewed the sons of the sabre with intense dislike in the aggregate, and honoured Alec Merriott with his especial aversion in particular. At the present moment, he is snorting over his food, according to custom. Mr. Babbington holds that there is a time for all things hazily, but fixedly,

and clearly that there is a time to eat. When his dinner is to his satisfaction, he concentrates himself thereon, and wastes no time in frivolous converse.

'Now, Captain Merriott, what do you mean by being all this time without coming to see me?'

'Not much encouragement after what you said to me the night of the theatricals,' replied Alec.

'I don't think I said anything much to anger you then; but if I did, recollect I was excited at the time.'

'Will you be just? Did I want to act? I gave way to you. Woman-like, you reviled me for failure in a thing attempted for your sake.'

'No; I don't deserve that. Won't you forgive me? I only said, "What a mess you've made of it!" and you know you did. But I am very sorry I said that much;' and Miss Remington put on the prettiest look of contrition possible.

'Well, I'll forgive you this time, Lia, on one condition.'

'You mustn't call me Lia; I have told you so before—it's not right, especially just now,' said the young lady, laughing.

Alec glanced round to see who might be participators in their conversation, which, needless to say, had been conducted in a low tone. Lady Mallandaine was on his left, whom he rather looked upon as an ally than otherwise in his present campaign. Mr. Babbington, intent upon an *entrée*, was on Miss Remington's other side.

'Ah! I have been doing what wasn't right so many years now, that I fear it is too late to change.'

'Silence,' said Lia, her eyes dancing with fun. 'Don't you know that my heavy admirer is within earshot, and that there's nothing but a *côtelette* of super-excellence intervenes between you and destruction? You have had an escape, Sir. Your blood

be upon your own head if you tempt Fortune again.'

Merriott smiled. 'Yes, it behoves me to be careful. If he fell on me corporeally or pecuniarily, I should be crushed.'

'Stay; you never told me the condition on which I was to be forgiven.'

'That you never ask me to act again. Light, isn't it?'

'Never, Captain Merriott,' laughed Lia; 'never. Now don't be angry,' she continued, as she saw his brow darken. 'You, who can do so many things well that men set store by, need feel little annoyance that you have failed for once in a line new to you.'

'I am sore, Lia,' he murmured, 'because I failed in the first thing undertaken at your asking.'

'Hush! don't be foolish. You did better at Aldershott the other day than anything you could have done on the stage. Though you've not had the grace to tell me of

your deeds of "derring-do," other people have.'

'You really think so?' and the inflection of Alec's voice told Miss Remington she had gone far enough.'

'People say so,' she replied. 'Do ask them to get me a glass of water, please.'

This attained, conversation became more general, and Merriott achieved no further *tête-à-tête*—so possible at a dinner-party if two people are so minded, so easily evaded if it seemeth good to one of them to avert it.

Lady Mallandaine bent her head, and the ladies rose.

'I have left some properties under the table, Captain Merriott, I know; will you collect them for me? I always do drop my things about. You can bring them to me when you come upstairs,' said Lia, as she rose and followed her hostess.

Sir Hervey and Egerton Slane are immersed in an argument on literary art (there

is such a thing, reader), and the baronet is inveighing against the realistic tendency of the novelists and dramatists of the day.

'No, you are wrong, Sir Hervey; wrong, I assure you,' exclaimed Slane. 'It is not romance has died out of the world, but the taste for sensation has come in. We caught it, like the hooping-cough, from our eldest child America. We prefer our novels, poetry, and plays, like our cookery in these days, rather high-flavoured. We require to be shocked morally or physically—either make me shudder while the hero goes through a combat with six or its equivalent, or else let me find the heroine naughtier than ever I fancied previously.'

Here coffee was announced, and an adjournment upstairs speedily followed. But Sir Hervey and Slane, who were interested in their conversation, continued it in the drawing-room. Their animated debate speedily attracted Miss Remington's attention. Now Lia was very fond of hearing Slane declaim,

as was his wont when fairly started upon a subject, and often threw in a shrewd question or remark on such occasions. The *littérateur*, who had rather a contemptuous estimate of women's brains, as a rule, made an exception in her favour. 'Clever girl that,' he said once; 'has read, has thought, and neither thinks she has "rights" nor a "mission."'

'Yes, Sir Hervey, it's no use disguising it. To succeed on the English stage in these days, you must be realistic; as Mr. Crummles said, "You must bring in the pump and tubs."'

'What do you think of "Lothair," Mr. Slane?' enquired Lia.

'Butchers are not allowed to sit on a jury, Miss Remington. Novelists should not be allowed to adjudicate on their colleagues' works.'

'What has all that to do with it? I don't ask you to adjudicate; I ask you to give an opinion.'

'Did you ever ask a man his opinion about another woman's beauty, Miss Remington?'

'Well, no—not often—yes.'

'Do you think you got a straightforward answer?'

'Well, I own I rather doubt it. I never knew a man thoroughly praise a woman to me.'

'*Pas si bête!* Not quite, but something to the point,' rejoined Slane.

'Well, tell us what your own views are on the art of novel-writing,' said Sir Hervey.

'Of the craft, and betray its secrets!' laughed Egerton. 'There's a *Vehme-gericht* connected with literature which the affiliated regard with awe. Of myself, I'll say nothing; but I'll tell you what some notable members of the trade have laid down. One of our leading novelists, who describes it as "the highest, widest, noblest, and greatest of all the arts," has seldom written a novel without a purpose, and contends that is one of the aims

of fiction. Another, in the reprint of an early work, alludes to it as that "mistaken thing a novel with a purpose." Hear what some of the French writers of fiction have said on the subject. One saith: "A novelist is an historian; he relates customs instead of relating facts. But it is a condition with the historian that he should be veracious and exhaustive. A well-written novel ought to be a photo graphic picture of the manners of an epoch." Another eminent French writer, one of the famous forty, declares that "a novelist has no right to calumniate his time, but that he has a right to depict it."'

'There, Sir Hervey; I can't lecture any more on the subject. Of course I've a view diametrically opposed to that of everyone else. I always have, you know, or at all events you say so.'

'Generally pretty truthfully,' retorted the baronet. 'But let's hear what it is.'

'Not to-night; I've done sermonising, and am going to talk to Lady Mallandaine;' and

Egerton crossed the room, and dropped into a low chair by Cecile's side.

'I have hardly had an opportunity to speak to you yet, Lady Mallandaine,' he said; 'your husband never will leave me and my pet theories alone.'

'Ah, I don't think you're a bit more merciful to his hobbies, Mr. Slane,' replied Cecile, laughing. I know you never can agree, and am quite sure you would both of you feel much disappointed if you did.'

'Good gracious! why, that's my one fault. I'm the most tolerant man out, and always agree with everyone. But how's Bertie? Has he said or done anything remarkable lately?'

'No,' smiled Cecile. 'Since his criticism of the drama, he has not brought forth anything worthy of relation.'

'Ah,' said Egerton, 'I used to be a disbeliever in these witticisms of children. I always held that the juvenile precocities which Leech so deliciously illustrated were evolved, for the most part, over a cigar by

the humorists of the "Punch" staff; but Bertie and another child or two of my acquaintance have caused me to recant that early heresy.'

'I'm sure, Mr. Slane,' returned Cecile, 'you may. I have heard quite as quaint speeches come from their little mouths as any that I have read in "Punch."'

'As Bertie's mother, of course you've authority to say so.'

'Don't laugh at me about my boy,' cried Cecile, 'or I'll confide no more of his youthful observations to your unbelieving ears.'

'I don't. Have I not this moment recanted? Have I not at this moment a story —aye, a true story—to relate to you which will puzzle Master Bertie to eclipse? I was staying at a house the other day, and at lunch our hostess, who was not very well, with a brief apology withdrew from the table ere the meal was finished. Her daughter, a bright-eyed little lady of some six years old, was taking her dinner on the occasion. As

her mother's skirt disappeared behind the door, she looked slyly round for a minute, and then exclaimed, "Now Mamma's gone, let's be naughty and dirty the tablecloth!"'

A peal of laughter rang from Cecile's lips. 'Is that really true, Mr. Slane,' she cried, 'or did you invent it?'

'No; on my honour, Lady Mallandaine, I heard it. You pay me a compliment when you imagine I could have invented it. I must say good night now; but when Bertie beats that, mind you let me know;' and Egerton shook hands with his hostess and departed.

'No such desertion in future, Captain Merriott, mind,' said Lia, gaily, as she bade him good night, 'or you will drive me to contesting with the *entrées* for an ascendency over Mr. Babbington. I must have a confidential adviser, you know.'

'Sooner than you should be engaged in such an inglorious struggle, pray still let me officiate in that capacity. Good night.'

CHAPTER XI.

'DE VITRE'S LEVÉE.'

ERNEST DE VITRE lived in Curzon Street, May Fair—a snug luxurious *ménage*, and much affected by those who had the *entrée* thereto. De Vitre's little dinners, De Vitre's little lunches in the season, and little suppers out of it, were affairs alluded to with reverence by such as were initiated in the mysteries of that 'Hedonist' temple. Some of the pleasantest and wickedest people in London were to be met at those later Saturnalia. I do not mean that those two attributes always go together—far from it. Yet methinks what Burns denominated 'the unco guid' hardly represent what may be looked upon as good company, with which to travel through this vale of tears. Still you may be

both agreeable and respectable, and yet no holder of the hideous doctrine of Calvinism. The world, however, is apt to look askew at these pleasant people, who have the audacity to disregard the grooves so arbitrarily laid down for them. With what a glow of delight society gibbets those defiers of social tyranny when the tempest at last overwhelms them! And what a miserable set of whipped hounds we all are when confronted with the thong of, not public opinion, but conventional custom!

> It is an ugly world, offend:
> Good people—how they wrangle!
> The manners that they never mend,
> The characters they mangle.
> They eat, and drink, and scheme, and plod,
> And go to church on Sunday;
> And many are afraid of God,
> And *more* of Mrs. Grundy.

Yes, to speak metaphorically, we most of us put our tails tight between our legs, and slink away down the beaten paths when Mrs. Grundy begins cracking her dog-whip.

Now Ernest De Vitre was one of those few who snapped his fingers in society's face. He made no parade at all of outraging society's sensitive feelings, but society was quite aware that, whether it wept over, hooted, or pointed the finger of scorn at Ernest De Vitre, that gentleman pursued the even tenour of his way, and swerved from his purpose not an iota. Society is so seldom confronted in this wise that, unless its opponent showeth great weakness in the joints of his armour, society is wont to cringe as ignominiously to the man who dares brave it as the rest of us do before the arbitrary yoke our own superstition has imposed. The set in which De Vitre chiefly moved in London were fast. They were wont even to astonish the London world with the audacity of their doings; and when they took flight to the provinces, occasionally made the natives' hair stand on end. Respectable country families stared aghast at the fashions imported by these 'extremists' into their sober neighbour-

hoods, and viewed with awe the astonishing toilettes in which the ladies of the *coterie* habitually indulged. The local dames and demoiselles held up their hands in deprecation of such *décolletée* dresses, &c., and then immediately harried their respective maids and dressmakers to produce their similitudes. High-priestess of this set was the Honourable Mrs. Oxley St. Leger, sworn friend and ally of De Vitre.

That gentleman sits this morning lounging over the *débris* of his breakfast in somewhat sombre frame of mind. As the summer sun glints into the pleasant little morning-room, he is conscious of a slight crumpling of the rose leaves that envelop his Sybarite existence. In his early days he was content to work steadily and wait patiently for any end in life he deemed it worth while to attain. But since he became a man of money, his cards have played so easily for him that he frets a little when they don't run to his liking. He has been much struck with Lady Mal-

landaine, and is anxious to prosecute that acquaintance. It has turned out much more difficult than he could have supposed. Cecile does not go out very much, and then moves in a circle other than his own. He certainly has contrived to meet her some few times since the Remington theatricals, but even on these somewhat rare occasions has failed to obtain much in the way of a *tête-à-tête* with her.

'Curious,' he mutters, 'the likeness between them. There is even something of the same trick of manner common to both. Absurd the interest I feel about this woman, still more so that I recognise that it springs principally from her likeness to another. Yes, and that other I cared for more than any woman before or since. I must and will know Lady Mallandaine well—psha! not as I know her now. She's like the harp with the hundred strings, and I would fain that they should all respond to the touch of my finger. How lovely she looked the other

night at the opera. How her face lit up when she got excited about Miss Remington's success that night I first met her. I to be beat,' he continued, as his lip curled, 'about the mixing where I list in this London *mélange*—I, who could make the skeleton dance in so many houses, if it were worth my while to pull the strings! No, forsooth! The set is humdrum and rather out of my ken, but we've all seen the rose in the kitchen-garden before now—no detriment to the bloom that it budded amongst the cabbages. It's a bore, but I suppose I must cultivate the cabbages a bit, if I would see my rose. Shall have to wade through a deal of bad cookery and indifferent wine in the pursuit, I'm afraid—by Jove, though, some one told me Mallandaine had a cook.'

Here his meditations were interrupted by the entrance of his valet, who silently presented a trio of notes on a salver.

De Vitre lit a cigar, and leisurely tore open the monogram of the first. 'Lady

Ombremere: will I excuse a short invitation and dine on Thursday? Hum, depends upon what engagements I have. Do, if I've nothing better on hand; decent dinner and safe rubber. Not in this new set I want to cultivate, though. Now for the next. Clara Montresor has a few friends to celbrate (want of epsilon, I see) her success in the new ballet of the "Transformation of the Dryads;" "do please come." Clara wanders about the tenses rather. Glad she's a success, but don't think I'm equal to attending that "grand celebrate," as Mr. Breitmann calls it. What's this? From Jack Terryton: will I give him a little time about last night's one fifty? May as well do the graceful—devilish lucky if I ever see it. My friend Jack's about broke.'

Here he arose, and sauntering across to the writing-table, turned over the leaves of a morocco-bound engagement-book. 'Thursday, dinner at the "Mastodon"—that's no good; ditto, with the Chippendale set at

Richmond—hardly hot enough for that ye Lady Ombremere will do.'

A touch of the bell brought his well-trained valet to his presence.

He took up Terryton's note and put it in his pocket, tossed the other two to his servant, and putting his finger upon the engagement-book, said:

'Accept Lady Ombremere's, Fletcher; fudge up excuses for these two and for that supper of Miss Montresor's; and leave them open for me to look at.'

'Very good, Sir. There's a man or two waiting to see you.'

'Know anything about 'em? People I want to see, eh?'

'You'd better see the first, Sir; he's about racing, I know. I can't quite make out the other; but I'll have another look at him, and tell you, if I can, by the time you've done with the first.'

'All right; show in number one.'

A few seconds, and a villanous beetle-

browed man, with gaudy necktie and particularly well-polished ankle-lace boots, made his appearance. Ducking his head and smoothing down his hair, he proceeded to polish his face with a coarse pockethandkerchief, looked uneasily round the room, as if mistrusting something or somebody, and finally remarked, 'Morning, Sir.'

'Sit down, Tom,' remarked De Vitre, as, whiffing his cigar, he lazily surveyed him from the hearth-rug. 'What is it?'

'Wot is it?' responded that worthy, again glancing suspiciously from the fireplace to the sofa, from the sofa to the window. 'Wot is it? it's robbery wot's the matter.'

'Go on,' replied his interlocutor, not one whit discomposed by this enigmatical reply.

'Well, Mr. De Vitre, there ain't no one in hearing, is there?' and again his eyes wandered round the apartment.

'No; it's all right. Go on.'

'Damme, then, I don't think she's meant, after all. I told you she won her trial. She

could win easy, if they'd let her ; but wot do they mean by cantering her the last two mornings, instead of sending her along, that's wot licks me, eh ?'

'Thank you, Tom; heard it last night. You are quite right—Gallopade's not meant for the Oakes.'

It was the first he had heard of it, all the same ; but it was seldom De Vitre allowed his myrmidons to think they brought news to him, especially those of the turf. He paid them liberally, but treated them scornfully, and was merciless in his sarcasm on false or useless information on any subject. *La main de fer*, when liberal, is usually well served.

'That'll do,' he continued, in answer to the tout's (for such he was) open-eyed astonishment. 'Go down below, and Fletcher will give you something to eat.'

Tom edged off his chair, ducked his head again, and disappeared, lost in amazement at his employer's sagacity.

'I can't make this one out at all, Sir,' said Fletcher, as he again entered the apartment. 'He's in the shabby-genteel style; says he knew you years ago, and has something to tell you you'll be glad to learn. Wants money, I've no doubt. Will you see him, Sir?'

'Well, yes; I've nothing else to do. Impostor, of course; but I rather like turning one inside out for amusement at times.'

The man whom Fletcher now ushered in was a pale, cadaverous, middle-aged man, with a red nose. He was attired in a suit of seedy black, and a tie meant for white, but inclining to tawny yellow. He stood fidgetting with a napless shiny hat—the picture of cringing embarrassment.

'Begging-letter impostor, with his pockets full of false certificates,' thought De Vitre; 'rather fun anatomising him to begin upon, and relegating him to Scotland-yard to wind up with.'

'You want to see me,' he observed. 'Sit down first; say what about next.'

The man bowed from his very hip-joints, seated himself nervously on the extreme edge of a chair, hemmed, coughed, and was then apparently lost in examination of his hat, which he turned round and round in his tremulous hands.

'Speak,' said De Vitre, in his clear, resolute tones, as he mentally summed up his visitor in the two words 'habitual drunkard.'

The sharp, curt command startled, as it was intended, the shy, nervous wretch to whom it was addressed. He dropped his hat, rose hurriedly from his chair, once more bowed abjectly, as he drew an ominous roll of paper from his pocket.

'Beg pardon, Sir, I'm sure. I ought to apologise for intruding, but I thought—that is—I felt—my health, Mr. De Vitre, has not been good of late. A missionary subscription-list, you see, Sir. Might I solicit a trifle towards it? In memory of bye-gone days, might I say a sovereign?'

As he spoke, his eyes wandered anxiously over the carpet; he never raised them to De Vitre's, though he at times glanced furtively at his boots. The trembling hands fidgetted nervously with the subscription-list—a pitiable sight to see, like most of those who worship at the shrine of Alcohol.

'Health not good of late, eh? No, my man; and it'll be a deuced deal worse, if you don't take a pull, and drink with a little more discretion than you've done these last few days or more. Give me that list. Of course it's a sham, and you as much entitled to collect for the missionaries as I am. You men are supposed to understand something of your trade. What the devil, Sir, possessed you to think me a fit mark for imposture? What made you think me likely to spare you? What could have induced the idea that you would not pass from my house to the hands of the police? Tell me; I feel curious.'

'Sir,' stammered the hapless wretch, as his

mouth twitched painfully, 'I'm a recognised minister, though not of the Established Church. If you don't choose to add—that is, give—your mite—in short, I will go.'

'You'll do nothing of the kind, except in the custody of a policeman,' said De Vitre, as he lounged back against the mantelpiece and leisurely contemplated his victim.

That nerveless unfortunate sank back on his chair, trembling visibly — most transparent of impostors ever seen.

'Look here, Sir; you appealed to me in memory of bye-gone days. I'm pretty good at faces, but don't recollect yours. Explain what you mean by that, if you wish to escape being given in charge.'

'Spare me, Mr. De Vitre;' and covering his face with his hands, the miserable man sobbed audibly. 'I don't wonder,' he said at last, 'you don't remember me. Give me some brandy, for God's sake, and I will tell you all.'

'Not get much out of him without,' mur-

mured De Vitre to himself, as he crossed the room to a handsome spirit-case. Then, filling a wine-glass full of brandy, he handed it to the shaking wretch, whose eyes had followed his every motion with all the fierce, eager glitter of hunger.

Hunger to him, poor wrecked atom of humanity! He craved for the fatal stimulant as the starving do for food. It was killing him fast, and he knew it, but all strength of mind has departed from those whom the 'Spirit-gnome' has once claimed as his own.

The dull, wandering eyes brightened as he gulped down the fiery fluid. For the first time he raised them, and looked De Vitre in the face; but his gaze sank before the keen, merciless eyes of the latter. 'More,' he gasped hoarsely, and held out the glass to be replenished.

De Vitre eyed him narrowly for a second, then half-filled it.

'There,' he said, 'that's enough. Poison to you, I suppose you know?'

'Know! Yes,' said the other. 'Why does it take so long to kill? But it warms—ah, it warms—one,' and he leisurely supped the fresh supply De Vitre had poured out for him.

'You don't recollect me,' he continued; 'odd, perhaps, if you did. When a man sticks steadily to that'—and here he jerked his head in the direction of the spirit-case—'for nearly ten years, it is wont to change his appearance a good deal, and that for the worse. Shall I tell you where we met last? It was in the Baptist school-room at Lasterton.'

Master of himself as De Vitre was generally, he could not suppress a slight start at this announcement; but recovering himself almost immediately, he turned towards the fireplace and busied himself about the lighting of a fresh cigar.

'Ah,' he said, as he once more confronted his companion, 'I think I recollect you now. You were the Methodistical drawing-

master of those days. Sorry to see you in this plight.'

'You should recollect me,' returned the other, sadly. 'I was present at a great moment in your life—a moment that made me the thing you see. No; I've hardly a right to say that; but all seemed to go wrong with me from that day—that day which convinced me there was no hope for me. I wasn't the wretch in those times I am now, and I've thought often, if you had never seen Lasterton, it might have been as I hoped. She might have learned to love me, had she never met you. It's all over,' he continued, 'many years ago; but I can't forget yet, not till that'—and once more he nodded towards the spirit-case—'has made thinking impossible.'

Steely and stern came De Vitre's reply. 'You dare,' he said, 'to put your criminal weakness on her or my shoulders. Better her fate as it is than to have been fettered to an habitual drunkard. Don't maunder to

me, man, about that being the cause of your backsliding. Whatever her fate with me, it would have been worse with you.'

'And that was?' enquired the other, eagerly.

'Death, poor child! Not at my hands, of course, and yet it was I took her where fever was raging; but how could I dream it?'

'My God!' and the broken man dropped back in his chair, and the tears welled fast through the fingers he covered his face with. 'Ah!' he gasped at last, 'I never thought of that; I pictured her in comfort, in luxury, and well taken care of.'

There was a pause of some moments, and then De Vitre spoke in much softened tones.

'Look here,' he said; 'you must go now. There's more than ever you hoped to get from me in support of your sham subscription-list;' and he thrust a bank-note into the trembling hands. 'It is in memory of her. Now go. Such as you are, I can assist you no more—you know it yourself;

were it otherwise, I had done so for her sake.'

With many protestations of thanks, and with maudlin tears running down his cheeks, this shattered specimen of mankind took his departure, incompetent even for the wretched trade of deception on which he had embarked.

A drunken swindler the one, an habitual worldly cynic the other—the memory of the same woman whom they had both loved the one soft spot left in their natures—a common tie which made De Vitre, with all his hardness of character, part tenderly with the miserable man, whose life was but unconsciousness and wailing.

The former continued musing for some moments, as he lazily smoked on. 'Odd,' he thought, 'reminiscences of those old Lasterton days, after being buried in oblivion for a good eight years, should begin to crop up now. First Gwynne's letter; then that extraordinary likeness; now this drunken wretch, with his

miserable memories. I lied when I told him she was dead. I know no more what's become of her than he does. Best to tell him so, though. It is on the cards he might turn troublesome, otherwise, when the drink is in him, as I fancy it generally is now-a-days. Poor devil! what a fine-looking man he was when I saw him last. However, a steady course of brandy spoils the looks mostly. I must know a little more about my friend, though. Take it the authorities of Scotland-yard are not wholly uninformed with regard to his mode of life. If they are, I shall enlighten them. A puppet it is as well I should hold the strings of for the short time it has left to live;' and De Vitre threw his cigar into the fire.

CHAPTER XII.

'A WATER-PARTY AT TWICKENHAM.'

Now, besides the pleasant mansion in Belgravia, to which we have been already introduced, Mr. Remington was also the much-to-be-envied owner of a villa on the banks of the Thames, close to Twickenham—one of those pleasant one-story houses all conservatory and billiard-room to the uninitiated, but which those conversant therewith know to have a capital dining-room at the back, with two or three cozy sitting-rooms looking out on the parterre, under the varied designations of morning, music, tea-room, or library, all common terms that denote these temples of idleness where the worshippers of the goddess may lounge, read, flirt, yawn, or sleep. A smooth-shaven lawn runs down to the

river's brink, and there stands a picturesque boat-house, moored around which are some half-dozen or more boating craft, ranging from the flat-bottomed punt to the sculling shallop.

A pet hobby was this of Mr. Remington's. I forget now how many gardeners he employed, or what his melons or pines cost him apiece; but this I do know, that upon one of his friends once complaining of the marvellous price he had had to pay for very early strawberries, old Remington, on hearing the figure, ejaculated, 'Cheap; gad, dirt cheap; in fact, d——d cheap. I grow my own, and they cost me pretty well double the money.'

The old gentleman was wondrous proud of his house, grounds, flowers, fruit, &c., and nothing pleased him so much in the dog-days as a series of dinner-parties, lounging-parties, water-parties—any name, in short, you might please to give them, so they but brought people to admire the villa and its sur-

roundings. I have already said Mr. Remington was a worshipper of Mammon. He reverenced the possessor of wealth; he had dedicated his life to its acquirement, but he was no niggard in the distribution thereof. He was by no means afraid of dissipating the ingots now he had got them. The cookery and wines at the Twickenham villa began to be talked about. How very perfect all the arrangements were, and how pleasant an evening might be passed there these hot June nights, was bruited abroad. Then the world became aware that, like the Turk in the famous ballad of 'Lord Bateman,'

> This Remington, he'd an only darter,
> The fairest my two eyes e'er see—

presumptive heiress to the accumulations of the City. The younger sons and those impecunious of their generation put the screw on their feminine belongings, and the Twickenham villa rapidly waxed into favour and importance. People who would have refused to know the Remingtons last year schemed

for invitations this. Good society can be quite as sycophantic as bad, and the duchesses and the Mrs. Smiths of this world are subject to the same meannesses and weaknesses. The study of human nature is not conducive to the formation of a very high standard regarding its innocence and simplicity. Cultivation and a higher civilisation teach us to conceal our baser tendencies; but their eradication —ah! that is another thing.

And so it came to pass that when Mrs. Remington's cards were out for a water-party at the Twickenham villa, towards the end of a sultry June, that good lady was quite in a flutter of delight and perturbation regarding the numerous applications she had for tickets thereto. Good society can be pretty brazened on these points, and Mrs. Remington's heart swelled with pride as applications were insidiously made to her on the part of people who had not hitherto deigned to notice her. Frank, honest Lia laughed at, and rather threw cold water on,

many of these applicants. 'Why trouble our head, mother,' she would say, 'about these people we don't know?' But Remington *père* also was awake to the glory of exhibiting his flowers and pineries to a fashionable mob, and invitations found their way right and left. The lady hostess prided herself much upon having been asked for a card for the Hon. Mrs. Oxley St. Leger, a fashionable leader of the great London world, and pictured herself mixing with all the *élite* of the land. She had not quite mastered the fact that their coming to her did not as a *sequitur* involve her going to them—an innocence that shows her still far from past her novitiate in London life.

The recent utter collapse of the French nation in war has been ascribed to the enervating luxury and corruption of the Empire. Is the life of our higher classes also rotten at the core? It is an age of luxury, of disbelief, and of sybaritism; but the grand old love of field sports and athletic exercises,

innate in our blood, will, I think, always save us from utter decadence. The wildest and most luxurious of our higher classes have always a great respect for a quality called in their shibboleth 'hardness.' They admire the man who, after being up till four A.M., is at the cover side the next morning, and rides as straight as if he had retired to bed at ten. 'Muscular Christianity' has been much sneered at of late, but its teaching is not to be despised for all that.

'You little Turk!' exclaimed Cecile to her boy, as she swept into her drawing-room, all clad in shining raiment, 'come here, and let me look at you. It's so good of Lia to ask you; and I can't take you, you know, unless you're nicely dressed.'

Bertie was lying curled up on an ottoman; he sprang down as his mother spoke, and ran towards her.

'But I've got on all my best things, Mamma; and nurse says I look very hand-

some, and I'm to go on the water with Lia—she promised. And is the carriage ready?'

'Not quite, child,' replied Cecile, as she looked down upon him, and with all a mother's love heartily endorsed nurse's opinion.

And the boy was fair to look upon, in his jacket and knickerbockers of violet velvet, with stockings to match and little buckled shoes; his fair hair brushed back; while his eyes sparkled and his cheeks flushed in anticipation of the day's pleasure.

'Yes, Bertie darling,' she remarked after kissing him, 'you look very nice; and you are going to take care of Mamma to-day, are you not? Take care of her all the way to Twickenham, and bring her back again afterwards.'

'Yes. Mamma looks nice, too,' observed the child, sententiously. 'But I'm to go out in a boat, Lia promised.'

'Of course you will, dear; and you'll be

very good, and answer prettily when you're spoken to—won't you, Bertie?'

'Yes, if they're nice people, Mamma; but I don't like everybody.'

'No, my child—nobody does; but Bertie mustn't be rude, all the same.'

'I never am.'

'Bert, my boy, don't tell stories. You are sometimes; but you won't be to-day, will you?'

'Not if I can help it, Mamma, and no nasty people talk to me.'

'Hush, child, here's the carriage. Come along.' And taking her boy by the hand, Cecile made her way downstairs.

The Twickenham lawn was thronged with variegated toilettes when Cecile arrived. Although she had numerous friends and acquaintance present, yet there were also a great many faces of the vast London world that she encountered for pretty well the first time. Her fair face and girlish figure attracted much attention from these last, as she

made her way across the lawn in search of Lia—attention to which Bertie not a little contributed; the one child present in all that gay throng. Suddenly Ernest De Vitre stood before her.

'Pray accept my arm, Lady Mallandaine. You are doubtless in search of Miss Remington. I left her just now at the head of a little *coterie* of her own.'

Cecile gladly accepted De Vitre's escort. He appeared opportunely, just as she was beginning to feel the want of a cavalier. De Vitre was wont to do so on such occasions. He calculated his opportunities with a coolness and patience not understanded by the generality of men. He had watched Lady Mallandaine's arrival, but had not stepped forward till he had seen her glance round, half timidly, half impatiently, in search of an escort. Women in the London world who had been *épris* with De Vitre (and they were not wanting) were always lavish in their encomiums on his tact. He seemed like a

guardian angel to the object of his worship, he had such a knack of turning up on critical occasions. He fell from the clouds to rescue them from boredom ; turned up just as opportunely to relieve them from an awkward situation. It was very simple to account for. De Vitre was ever-present in the society the regnant goddess of the time might frequent. He was a quick reader of faces and signs. Few knew society's landmarks more accurately than he. Could it be much wonder that to this keen critical observer the one face he was for the time making it his principal business to study was fair, open, and legible?

At this moment Roland Dance passed them in close attendance upon a lady; and as he raised his hat to Cecile, his fair companion bent her stately head to De Vitre.

A woman to turn and look again at. Tall and supple of figure, she swept across the grass with haughty, undulating movement that challenged attention and criticism. A

pale yet slightly worn face, with a predominant expression of extreme weariness; magnificent black eyes, generally half veiled under their lids, but which ever and anon flashed upon you with a bold, insolent stare —such was Pauline St. Leger, a woman whose acquaintance had been fatal to many men, and was ever dangerous to such of her own sex as she condescended to be upon terms of intimacy with. Like the leopard—beautiful, powerful, dangerous, and relentless—a woman who, had her life been cast differently, might have been a jewel well worth the wearing—who had germs of good even still left in her, though well-nigh stifled by the career she had run—Pauline was capable of generosity even yet at times, and had more than once showed mercy unfitting her character as the free lance she had now become.

'Who was that?' enquired Cecile of her companion; 'the lady, I mean, with Mr. Dance?'

'Don't you know Mrs. St. Leger?' returned De Vitre. 'I should have thought you must have met her. She is one of the pleasantest women of my acquaintance. Rather belied by the world, because she a little despises the conventionalities—a thing the world is apt to carp at, but with no real harm in her.'

Hardly a true verdict this; but then De Vitre and Pauline St. Leger were bound in a strict *camaraderie.*

'No; I have heard of her often, of course, but never saw her, I think, before. Surely there is Lia—Miss Remington, I mean.'

As she spoke Lia came forward to meet her, attended by Alec Merriott, Slane, and some three or four more.

'I thought you were never coming, Cecile,' exclaimed that young lady as she greeted her guest; 'and Bertie, my darling, I thought I should have to go boating by myself. The punt is all ready, Bert, and we'll go for a row as soon as I can get away.'

'You mustn't be long, Lia—I want to go on the water; and you promised, you know.'

'Yes, child, and so you shall. Lia always keeps her promises, doesn't she? But I must look after my guests a little, Bert.'

'Of course you must, Miss Remington; and my worn cheeks and parched lips might already attest the privations I have suffered while watching you and Alec there talk nonsense,' exclaimed Egerton Slane. 'Come along with me, little man,' he continued, catching the boy in his arms. 'Tell her'—and he nodded his head towards Miss Remington—'to feed us first, and she may do as she lists with us afterwards.'

He was a child of great likes and dislikes, Bertie; but though Slane had never vouchsafed him any great notice, he was a favourite with the boy, and from his shoulder he exclaimed—

'Yes; we are hungry, Lia. Get us something to eat, and then we'll all go on the water. Won't that be nice?'

Miss Remington laughed merrily.

'Come along,' she cried. 'Captain Merriott, you shall carve for us first, and pull stroke of my boat, as a reward, afterwards; and Mr. Slane, if you won't find fault with or contradict anybody for half an hour, you shall be one of my crew also.'

'Absurd! I never contradict anyone; and what could there be at "The Willows" (the name of the villa) to find fault with?'

'Why, isn't there *me*, if there's nothing else? and you know you're rude enough to do it.'

'Come along, Bertie, she's getting abusive and improper;' and Slane dashed off towards a secluded room dedicated to creature comforts which he, as an *habitué*, knew right well, followed by the rest of the laughing troop.

'There, Sir,' he said, as he placed the boy in a chair; 'what can we do for your worship now? Will you have a little cold chicken, or wait for the fricasseed lightning

I've ordered for my own eating? There'll be some stewed elephant in directly.'

'Don't tell stories,' replied Bertie, gravely; 'and you musn't be rude to Lia, because I shan't let you; and I want some ham, please —oh! and there's strawberries.'

'No; I shall sit here, thanks, Captain Merriott, betwixt Bertie, whom I love, and Mr. Slane, whom I hate, or ought to do.'

'Charmed to hear it; women change their minds weekly. If Bertie has the best of it to-day, my turn comes next.'

They were great allies those two, and always indulged in much *badinage*.

'You will find that, like most of your theories, fallacious,' laughed Miss Remington.

'And you say I'm not to contradict. I will—I shall—I do.'

'It's very rude to contradict, Mamma says,' chimed in Bertie.

'And Mamma's right, dear, and Mr. Slane's wrong, as usual—isn't he?'

'There's no arguing with women and

infants,' retorted Slane. 'Pass that pie, Alec, and—yes, you may send the champagne with it. I was only debarred from contradiction, feminine idea of argument; and from finding fault, feminine idea of differing in opinion.'

De Vitre meanwhile had unobtrusively attached himself to the party. He knew them all, but, except in the case of Egerton Slane, his acquaintanceship was of the slightest. He said but little as yet, quietly took care of Lady Mallandaine, and was prepared to exert himself in any way that might further the end he had in view—to wit, a closer intimacy with Cecile and her friends than he as yet possessed.

But the nondescript meal comes to an end. Bertie has escaped from his chair, and, having climbed into Lia's lap, is exercising much pressure with regard to the aquatic part of the entertainment.

'Now,' cried Miss Remington, 'Lady Mallandaine and I are going to hoist our flag. Who 'lists under our banner?'

Universal assent from the men, and a general move across the lawn to the river. There, under the active direction of Alec Merriott, a good heavy, roomy wherry, fitted as a randan, is speedily unmoored from the boat-house and paddled up to the lawn for the ladies to embark.

'Come along, Bertie, darling,' said Miss Remington; and, accompanied by the child, she was assisted to the stern of the wherry. 'Oh, dear! I have forgot my parasol,' she exclaimed. 'Would you mind, Captain Merriott, running up to the luncheon-room for it?'

'Of course not; I'll be back in a minute;' and Alec sprang to the bank and ran across the lawn.

Cecile was standing on the bank, talking with De Vitre, when a piercing shriek from Lia and a half-smothered cry from her boy smote her ear. She turned her head just in time to see Bertie disappear in the water and Slane snatch back Miss Remington

from following in a hopeless attempt to save him.

Her cheeks blanched, her heart seemed to stand still, her limbs trembled beneath her, the very blood seemed frozen in her veins. Speech, motion, almost thought, seemed paralysed.

Quick as lightning a man's hat and coat are cast upon the bank. Ere the remainder of the spectators' minds have well grasped the fact of the accident, Ernest De Vitre's close-pressed hands cleave the glittering water, and, with a much more ostensive splash, he also disappears from the sight of the bystanders. It is but for a few seconds, and then he rises, bearing the boy in one hand, and in less than half a dozen strokes is clinging with his burden to the bank. Plenty of hands there to help them ashore, and, with Bertie still in his arms, crying and shivering from his immersion, he dashes up to Lady Mallandaine. Cecile makes some ineffectual attempts to speak, and then falls

back senseless into the arms of the nearest looker-on.

'Miss Remington,' exclaimed De Vitre, in quick, authoritative tones, 'I'll leave Lady Mallandaine to your care, and run up with this boy to the house. Nothing but a ducking; still, perhaps, the sooner he's between blankets the better.'

But that mysterious current, which, in default of a better term, I must call the magic circle of electric sympathy had already spread. The whisper of an accident flew with lightning rapidity through that gay throng. They clustered towards the river, as De Vitre, dripping and coatless, bore Bertie swiftly towards the house. The little knot on the bank around Cecile of course attracted attention, and, amongst others, Roland Dance, with Mrs. St. Leger on his arm, pushed through the crowd. Lia, shockingly unnerved herself, supported Cecile's head in her lap and bathed her temples.

Pauline took the whole thing in at a glance.

'Stop, Roland,' she said, as she marked that Cecile's quivering lips and fluttering eyelids gave signs of returning animation; 'I can be of use here. They have all lost their heads; even Miss Remington is not herself.'

Dropping Dance's arm, she glided into the circle, and, as Lady Mallandaine opened her eyes and stared vaguely around, bent over her, and whispered in that low thrilling voice that had turned so many men's heads, 'Your boy is quite safe and wants you. Won't you come to him?'

Cecile started, and sat up with a low choking sob. 'Where, where is he?' she gasped.

'Safe in the house, and asking for his Mamma,' returned Pauline, audaciously. 'Won't you try to come to him?'

The spell answered, and in a few seconds, leaning on Mrs. St. Leger's arm, Cecile

crossed the lawn and made her way to her darling's bedside.

De Vitre met her at the door of the chamber with a reassuring smile. 'You will find your boy all right, Lady Mallandaine, and very mutinous at having been put to bed. There is nothing the matter with him; but of course his clothes are too wet to put on. You had better exercise your authority, for he is getting beyond me;' and De Vitre passed out, with a bow, to make some arrangement for changing his own dripping garments.

'Oh, Lia,' murmured the mother to Miss Remington, who accompanied her, 'I thought I had lost him. How did it all happen? Bertie, dear, how could you fall into the water?' and seating herself on the bedside, Cecile gathered her treasure in her arms.

'I hardly know,' replied Lia. 'I just caught sight of him as he toppled over, and made a jump to save him; but, I think, if

Mr. Slane had not caught me, I should have only fallen in also.'

'That would have been nice,' replied the boy, 'because then you would have had to go to bed too. I was so frightened, Mamma, and it was so cold; and I only know I thought I should never get out again, till I found that gentleman running with me across the lawn. But I am warm now; and who is he?'

'Thank God!' muttered Cecile, as she pictured how he might have been lying cold and dank at the bottom of the river even now but for that prompt assistance. 'It was Mr. De Vitre saved him, Lia, was it not? I've a dim recollection of seeing some one jump into the water just as I lost sight of him.'

'Yes, it was Mr. De Vitre; he sprang in directly, and brought him out in a few seconds; and you fainted just as he bore him up the bank to you.'

'I owe him a great debt of gratitude,'

murmured Lady Mallandaine; 'more than I can ever repay.'

At last Bertie fell asleep; and while some wraps were improvised for his return to town, Cecile went downstairs, her principal object being to thank Ernest De Vitre for her boy's life. But De Vitre was gone; he had borrowed some garments from the butler, and departed forthwith.

Many expressions of sympathy were showered on Cecile; and amongst others, Mrs. St. Leger came up to her once more. 'I trust, Lady Mallandaine,' she said, 'your boy is none the worse for his plunge; I hear not. We have never met before, but circumstances sometimes overrule the stereotyped laws of society, and I trust you will allow me to call and ask after your child.'

What could Cecile say to this speech, delivered in Pauline St. Leger's most winning manner? and how winning that could be, when she chose, even her enemies, by no means few, could testify. Moreover, she

could but feel kindly to her who had first whispered the assurance in her ear of Bertie's safety. She could but smile, and say she should be delighted to see her. And thus in one afternoon, urged by the most sacred feeling of woman's life—love for her child—did Cecile forge the first links of a chain that occasioned her afterwards much bitter suffering and anguish.

But the carriages come rolling up, and the guests once more wend their way homeward. Wearied and worn the many, flushed and delighted the few—for, alas! we so soon grow old, and become bored with society's charms. The cup of pleasure is so shallow that the goblet is speedily drained, and it is but for a brief season that all is gaiety. Most malcontent of all that assembly, perhaps, is a tall fair man, who journeyeth to town behind a big regalia in solitude and a hansom.

'Just my infernal luck,' he mutters, 'to be sent for that cursed parasol when the

accident happened. I don't want to run down De Vitre; he was prompt and quick, but any fool that could swim could have done it too. With Lia there, it would have been a real turn for me. No good a bit to him, and made him deuced uncomfortable into the bargain. Confound it, I never can get a chance;' and Alec Merriott leant back and deluged the fresh night air with tobacco smoke.

CHAPTER XIII.

'MRS. ST. LEGER AT HOME.'

It has been asserted that it is 'women who corrupt women.' I have no wish to enter into this ethical question; but that the deterioration of woman's moral nature is in the aggregate far more the work of her female associates than of her male, I have no hesitation in affirming. Men only gain great ascendency over women through their affections, and that in itself constitutes a great antidote to corruption. But the pitiless sneers of her sisters, the wounds to her vanity that the inability to vie with them in dress or equipage inflict, the polished gibe, the petty spitefulness that shows up her weakness in taste, talent, beauty, or wealth—these are hard to bear. What wonder that feminine

nature at times can bear no more, and recks little at what cost it may turn the tables.

A somewhat stormy life had been Pauline St. Leger's. A gay, clever, handsome girl, with a decided will of her own, she came at eighteen direct from school to take the head of her father's establishment. And what a post that was! It was the presiding over the household of a reprobate, well-nigh ruined gambler; a house frequented by turfites, *vauriens*, young men of good family, but with neither principles nor expectations; a house in which a lady rarely set foot. 'Old Beardmore is a capital fellow, with equally capital claret and shooting; rather a rip, of course, but what does it matter?—pleasant house to stay at, and you're sure of a rubber at decent (which might be translated *high*) points.' In such wise spoke the fast and irreverent youth of this generation regarding Miss Beardmore's father.

Soon it was whispered about that old

Beardmore had a daughter—a marvellously handsome daughter. 'A real clipper, you know, not made up for sale, but just about the handsomest girl I ever saw,' said Jemmy Brattle, the well-known gentleman-rider, whose artistic and straightforward performances the sporting papers were never tired of eulogising, but who, it was whispered, had once or twice been mixed up in suspicious transactions; which, in plain English, meant that there was nothing in the shape of turf robbery that Mr. Brattle was not ready to lend a hand in, always providing that it in some way conduced to his, Mr. Brattle's, benefit.

Still Miss Beardmore was rarely seen in society. She might appear at the county ball, and on such occasions had no lack of partners. Far from it; she was the rage; but the women tabooed her. It was not to be supposed that a clever girl like Pauline could be blind to this fact, and if she smiled outwardly she bled inwardly. She was bit-

terly sore about the way the ladies of the county passed her over, for it must be borne in mind that the Beardmores were of good blood in those parts, and though much impoverished of late years, were still owners nominally of many acres, heavily mortgaged though they might be.

But the fact was, Mr. Beardmore was a man on whom respectability looked askance. It was not that he had gambled and come to grief; it was not that he had raced and impoverished his property largely—society does not thrust out men for such peccadilloes—but for some years after his wife's death, which took place when Pauline was but a child, Brancepath had been no decorous establishment—a rendezvous of men of no character, of ladies of more than doubtful. True it was that since his daughter's assumption of the reins of government, Brancepath had in a modified sense reformed. Dubious feminine society had disappeared from that time, but the men who visited there were still by no

means of the elect, and not of the kind welcomed in ordinary country houses.

Ere she had attained her twentieth year, it presented itself clearly to Pauline's mind that if she ever wished to attain any social status —and she dearly coveted it—she must marry. At that time the two most elegible admirers in her train were Ernest De Vitre and the Honourable Oxley St. Leger. St. Leger was a colonel in the Guards, arrived at pretty well the end of his resources; a man leading much such a life as her father had led; good looking, and with all the easy manner of good society. Pauline inherited from her mother some twenty-five thousand pounds, which became her own upon attaining her majority. The frequenters of the house rather opined that she would marry De Vitre; but he suddenly gave up his visits to Brancepath, and within another six months Pauline had married Oxley St. Leger. Her father upon that occasion did her about the first good turn that he had ever done—in

insisting that her own fortune should be rigidly settled on herself and children. Children there were none. It was an ill-assorted marriage, and by the end of a year each went his and her own way. I don't mean that they separated; they still lived nominally under the same roof in a little house in May Fair, in which they had set up their tent, but by tacit consent each took his and her own path in life. Mrs. St. Leger visited, stayed, and went out where she listed; while her husband frequented his own haunts, and disappeared on various and mysterious jaunts unquestioned by her.

Handsome, clever, and with a most winning manner, aided by the introduction her husband's family gave her, Pauline, not slowly, but rapidly made her way into society. The men were at once at her feet; but her early experiences taught Pauline that she must make her way with the women too, and she laid herself out most successfully to

conciliate the latter. She played at starting the *rôle* of the neglected wife with marvellous success; and people who regarded Oxley St. Leger as an exceedingly black sheep, pitied and petted his deserted partner. It was wonderful how soon she became a power in fashionable circles. She dressed to perfection; but as for entertaining, of course the Oxley St. Legers were not expected to do that. 'We are such paupers, you know,' Pauline would say with a smile, 'I can't ask you to dinner; but come and see me at lunch, and I *can* promise you shall not be poisoned.' Mrs. St. Leger's luncheons were soon an established fact in the London world, and no invitation of that kind was more eagerly jumped at in the season.

All this occurred, of course, some years before the date of my story. At the present moment Pauline was quite a leader in the set she affected, and had no difficulty in obtaining an *entrée* into any house she coveted. It is true people did sometimes

muse and ponder over how the Oxley St. Legers carried on—how Mrs. St. Leger settled for her numberless rich and becoming toilettes, opera boxes, &c. But the little house in May Fair was their own, and the ways of the Providence that tempers the wind to the shorn lambs of Bohemia are inscrutable. The St. Legers both belonged to that unfathomable race which reckons within its magic circle both peers and vagabonds. So still they scrambled on. Women in Pauline's position can generally compass opera boxes, carriages, &c. in great measure gratuitously, and of course Mrs. St. Leger was not quite the woman to overlook her tithes of this kind.

'Next to trying to break the bank at Baden,' I once heard a veteran of many London experiences observe, 'the most expensive thing I know is a flirtation with a married woman, practically, but not legally, separated from her husband.' And I fancy many of Pauline's admirers would have endorsed that

statement. That Mrs. St. Leger's name had been at times coupled with a good many men's was a matter of course; but though often talked about, Pauline had never given rise to scandal such as she was unable to live down. In one case only had the London world shown a strange clemency, and that was regarding her intimacy with Ernest De Vitre. It was true there was some slight babble years back concerning their friendship, but it had rapidly passed over, and at this time Mrs. St. Leger and De Vitre were regarded as sworn allies without scandal or detriment. They lived in the same set, visited the same country houses in the autumn, and he was one of the most constant *habitués* of the little house in May Fair; yet none of the London world now-a-days ever dreamt of coupling those two in scandalous story.

Some three weeks have elapsed since the Twickenham water-party, and Pauline has cemented her acquaintance with Lady Mallandaine. I don't mean that they are inti-

mates, but calls have been exchanged, and they are inscribed upon each other's visiting-lists. Mrs. St. Leger sits in her pretty drawing-room, leaning her cheek upon her hand and lost in thought. The delicate eyebrows straighten their curve, and the mouth hardens a little, as she muses. Miserable subject of meditation that graves lines on most of our faces and sprinkles our hair with silver—'ways and means.' There are of course the slight percentage of millionaires to whom scarcity of gold is a thing unknown—objects indeed of envy these! but for the blessed conviction that life may be made too easy—yes, you may arrive at anathematising the rose leaves. Still to most of us there comes the hour when we meditate upon that insolvable problem, the paying of five shillings with half-a-crown. And that problem it was that occupied Pauline St. Leger's thoughts this fair summer morning. By no means the first time such difficulty had presented itself. Common enough phase in her

father's harum-scarum establishment during her *régime* there.

But the announcement of Mr. De Vitre broke the thread of Pauline's sombre musings, and her brow cleared as she welcomed Ernest.

'Sit down and talk to me,' she exclaimed; 'my thoughts have been none of the brightest, and I would fain change their current.'

'What's the matter? What has gone wrong now?'

'Nothing. Simply the old story—I am horrible hard up, and don't see my way. There, that will do; I don't want to talk to you about it as yet, though you've been my confidant pretty often on such points.'

'Yes,' returned De Vitre, from the depths of an easy-chair in which he had ensconced himself; 'and I trust you will allow have exerted myself to the best of my ability to assist you on such occasions.'

'Oh, yes, you've been very kind; but

don't bore me with recapitulation of past benefits just now. By the way, I have never had an opportunity of expressing my admiration of your conduct at Twickenham. Has the Royal Humane Society sent you a medal yet?'

'No,' laughed De Vitre; 'I am afraid my heroic struggles just out of my depth, about fifteen feet from the bank, and within reach of unlimited assistance, have been overlooked by that vigilant body.'

'Ah, never mind! No doubt you got a very pretty note from Lady Mallandaine; and after the way you went on about her the other night at the Courthopes, I dare-say you think that more to the purpose.'

'I don't remember saying more than that I had just met her, and was much impressed with her beauty,' replied Ernest, lazily.

'Well, all these things go by comparison —that's raving for you. But she is pretty—very pretty; and what is more, she is a sweet innocent little thing, without being so insipid

as such women are mostly;' and Pauline shrugged her shoulders.

'Why, have you made her acquaintance?' exclaimed De Vitre, with considerable astonishment.

'Yes,' laughed Mrs. St. Leger; 'I hadn't the opportunity of exhibiting heroism to your extent, but I had the opportunity of being useful. Of course she fainted on seeing the catastrophe—women of her type always do; and the people who ran to her assistance had all lost their heads. The minute she came to herself I administered the stimulant she wanted, but which the others were too confused to think of.'

'And that was?'——

'Simply to tell her that her boy was safe and asking for her. It acted like magic. She was pale as death and shaking like an aspen. I know, because I gave her my arm across the lawn, and could feel how she trembled; but she mastered herself at once. She's devoted to that boy—and a fine little

fellow he is. I wonder,' continued Pauline, musingly, 'if I had had a child, whether I could have cared about the little animal in that fashion.'

'I've no doubt you would have made a most exemplary mother,' replied De Vitre, with a slight inflection of the voice.

'Don't lie to me, Ernest,' retorted Mrs. St. Leger, with a flash of her dark eyes as the slight sarcasm of the tones caught her ear; 'you know you don't think so. I'm not fond of children, but it may be different with one's own.'

'And pray have you seen Lady Mallandaine since?' asked De Vitre.

'Yes,' replied Pauline, as she pushed back the heavy masses of hair from her temples; 'I called to enquire after the little unfortunate, and was admitted. I hardly know what made me ask to go in—on Roland Dance's account, I think; they are great friends of his, you know. So that now we have exchanged cards.'

'If one could do you the injustice of supposing you to have a weakness, Pauline, I should say you had for Roland Dance.'

'Poor Roland!' said Mrs. St. Leger, musingly. 'Yes, I do like him. He is genuine, at all events; and despite his London training, I can see him wince when I'm kind to Sir Alberic. Not worth catching? Well, perhaps not; but we kill sometimes to *désennuyée*.'

'If your victims only knew your sentiments,' laughed De Vitre, 'they would taste but modified happiness.'

'Quite as much as they deserve. You are wretches, most of you; and it is only retributive justice that a few of us should have the power of reprisal. It was Madame de Staël, wasn't it, who said, "*Plus j'ai connu les hommes, mieux j'ai aimé les chiens?*" I never understood that remark until I saw her picture. He must have been rather a bold or a blind man who ventured to talk soft nonsense to her.'

'According to what we are told, nobody ever had much chance to talk anything to her. She did all that herself.'

'Yes, and the poor dogs had to listen. That would quite account for her singular preference,' said Pauline, laughing. 'But havn't you anything to tell me this morning? Has not the Anti-Lysistrata been amusing lately?'

'Well, not very. Egerton Slane declared the other night that, though it was quite probable in a few years that our representatives would be all women, he felt quite sure that, from a misconception of the office, they would never agree about electing a "Speaker," as they would be all candidates.'

'Yes, that's like Mr. Slane.'

'While Durant enlivened us with an historiette (of course of his own manufacture) that Mrs. Axminster—people, you know, who have just taken that big house near Rutland Gate, and made their money

in carpets—had quarrelled with her husband about the colour of her carriage-horses. She had heard (baize) bays were in fashion, and expected them to be pea-green.'

'Mr. Durant is not so happy as usual,' replied Pauline, with a slight smile. 'But, Ernest, I want to know how it is you are so struck with Lady Mallandaine.'

'Pray, who told you that I was?' enquired De Vitre.

'Mine own eyes; I know you so well. It's not like you to take the trouble to get introduced to anyone who don't happen to move in your own circle without strong reasons.'

'Your eyes are not only very handsome, but very keen,' he replied. 'If you must know, she is a reminiscence to me.'

'Why, you never saw her till the other day. I don't understand you.'

'No. Well, she's wonderfully like a woman who was a great deal to me many years ago—no one you ever saw or heard

of. It was that old memory, I think, impelled me to make her acquaintance.'

'Ah!' said Mrs. St. Leger, musingly, 'I think I can understand that. Well, all I can say is, if you mean to cultivate her, the fates have been most propitious. Fishing that boy out of the water the other day gives you a great start. It bridges over all the preliminaries, and places you on an intimate footing at once.'

De Vitre made no reply, but toyed carelessly with a paper-knife that he had picked up from the adjoining table.

'Well, Ernest,' said Mrs. St. Leger, rising, 'I must go out now and get a little fresh air. I don't apologise to you for my lack of courtesy. Will you come to lunch?'

'No, thanks, not to-day;' and De Vitre made his obeisance.

CHAPTER XIV.

'HER GRACE OF PUMICESTONE'S BALL.'

EXCEEDING was the gratitude of Cecile for what she looked upon as 'her boy's life.' Sir Hervey's card was on De Vitre's table the next morning, accompanied by a manly note of heartfelt thankfulness, regretting that he had so far failed to acknowledge personally the obligation under which he had been placed. To this was added a tear-stained fluttering little note from Cecile, begging that Mr. De Vitre would call and let her thank him for his chivalrous action, and show her personally that he had sustained no harm from his gallant exertions in her child's behalf.

Ernest De Vitre did call. He laughingly disclaimed any particular credit on the oc-

casion; said that he had the mere luck to be the first to see the child topple over; that there were half a score men on the bank who could have rendered service prompt and effective as he had done; and wound up by making great friends with the originator of the scene, Master Bertie himself.

'No, Mr. De Vitre,' said Cecile, as she said good-bye to him at the expiration of his first visit; 'you don't cheat us out of our gratitude in that fashion—does he, Hervey? Whether there were hands as willing or not to help me at my need, it is clear there were none so ready. We are no longer acquaintances, but friends in earnest, remember;' and the tears stood in Cecile's eyes as she extended her hand to him.

'Yes, De Vitre, I hope you will take what my wife says as really meant. Circumstances carry us swiftly over years of casual acquaintance at times. Either here or at Childerley, we shall be only too glad to see you whenever you will volunteer us a visit.'

And Ernest De Vitre had prosecuted his acquaintance with the Mallandaines pretty assiduously ever since. He often dropped in to lunch, and was by this time regarded quite as to be expected by Cecile at least three days a week. He had dined there three or four times, and had quite established himself on the easy footing of an *ami de la maison.*

Bertie had never quite got over his ducking. The boy was rather delicate, strong and healthy as he looked, and a violent cold had been the result—a cold which he seemed unable to shake off. Still, though not quite himself, the doctors agreed in their prognostications that change of air would speedily put him to rights; and as the Mallandaines were to leave town for Childerley in the course of the ensuing fortnight, that would be speedily attainable.

The season was well-nigh at its dregs. It was later far than Lady Mallandaine had ever 'kept high feast and festival' before in London. She lingered but for one ball.

Rumour said it was to be the great event of the year. A ticket for Clanronald House was the subject of much intrigue and manœuvring.

Her Grace of Pumicestone (the owner thereof), daughter of a grand old Scottish family, who, tracing their descent back to pre-Adamite times, had only at last fairly lost the chain amongst the mastodons, had been brought up to wed strawberry leaves. She had succeeded—a fact not always given to such high intention. She had contributed little further to this world beyond showing her contempt for the very inferior clay that composed the generation it was her misfortune to be born in. To speak geologically, it was the old red-sandstone contemplating the new deposits. Nothing but geological metaphor is left in which to describe the antiquity of her Grace's family. Although now grown somewhat angular and ill-favoured (red-standstone formation showing the encroachments of democracy's flood-

tides), yet society still shrank, as, clad in velvet and radiant with diamonds, she superciliously surveyed it through her heavy gold eyeglass. When her Grace deigned to receive, society cringed, and, metaphorically speaking, licked her very doorsteps for cards of invitation.

What are these mock idols that society erects, and, like the Eastern fanatic, approaches over weary miles on its bended knees? Fashion! Money! Notoriety!—the trinity of gods that modern idolaters worship. It reminds one of the old game of forfeits. We bow to the first, kneel to the second, and are lost in awe and admiration of the third. Her Grace of Pumicestone combined all three. The possession of the two first would have conferred upon her the third, even had she not enjoyed the reputation of a faculty for rudeness almost without parallel. It was not cleverness or satirical power on her Grace's part—far from it. It was not with intentional object of wounding—no, her Grace was not maliciously disposed

But it was the utter negation that the generality of mankind with whom she came in contact were of the same flesh and blood as herself. She looked upon them mostly as a rather lower type of humanity, and treated them either with contemptuous kindness or freezing indifference.

Lady Mallandaine had received a card for the great Clanronald House ball, much to her astonishment, for she mixed not in the distinguished circle of which her Grace constituted the sun. But, nevertheless, Cecile felt a slight flush of pardonable vanity at finding herself in possession of the *entrée* to the innermost circle of the London world. She was quite aware how people canvassed, schemed, and toiled to compass the possession of one of these bits of cardboard. Hers had come to her unsought, and Cecile was not a little proud of her right to set her slipper in Clanronald House, if she so chose.

Not much mystery really how it came. Ernest De Vitre, as has been before men-

tioned, pulled the strings of a good many of the puppets of London life. I don't know that his acquaintance with the Duchess, which was slight, quite enabled him to do this; but there were plenty of weak spots in the Duke's character likely to be assailable by a man like De Vitre. It was not the set he himself most affected. In the very fast and free-and-easy circle in which he and Pauline St. Leger bore sway, I am afraid the Pumice-stone circle were looked upon as a little heavy; a set to which it behoved you to show that you had the *entrée*, and then to be bored with it as little as might be.

But it is the night of the Duchess's ball, and Cecile is in sore tribulation. Little Bertie has been ailing for some days, and to-night is more feverish and restless than usual. Cecile has been devoted to him, and, much as she wishes to attend this ball, can hardly make up her mind to leave her child. True, the doctors tell her that there is nothing of any consequence amiss; but the mother's

heart quakes at the bare idea of harm coming to her darling. She consults Sir Hervey at dinner anxiously, but fails to inoculate him with her fears. Fond as he is of his boy, his more masculine nerves don't sympathise with her to this extent. He also feels a certain pride that his young wife's name should figure amongst the list that were present at Her Grace of Pumicestone's ball.

Cecile is distracted. She does not like to leave her child, and yet she would fain for a short time appear at Clanronald House.

'Don't leave me, Mamma,' cries Bertie; 'I am so hot, and my head aches so. How pretty you look to-night; but you're not going away, are you?'

She was standing by his bedside in her ball dress; ferns and geraniums wreathed in her soft fair hair; her mind shaken by nervous doubt and vacillation.

'He's no worse, Hannah, is he?' she enquired, anxiously.

'No, my lady; don't you fret about him.

He has a bad cold, and is a little feverish and restless, but there is no reason for you to be alarmed. I shall be with him till you return.'

'Bertie, darling,' said Cecile, as she bent over him and pressed her lips to the poor flushed little face, 'Mamma must leave you for a short time. You'll be brave, my own, won't you? I know, Bert, you are suffering, but Mamma will be away only a very short time.'

'Don't go, Mamma; please don't go,' replied the child, querulously; 'my head is so hot.'

'Send down to Sir Hervey, and say I want to see him here immediately,' exclaimed Lady Mallandaine.

And Hannah at once obeyed her mistress's mandate.

Careless of her dress, Cecile gathered her boy in her arms, and bathed his forehead with vinegar and water. 'That's better, Bertie, dear, isn't it?' she said, as, after a few minutes he nestled down into her em-

brace; 'more comfortable now, pet, are you not?'

'Yes, Mamma; but don't go away from Bertie to-night; Mamma won't, will she?' And the child threw his little arms round her neck, and pressed his parched, fever-dried lips against her cheek.

'Sir Hervey has gone down to the House, my lady,' said Hannah, as she quietly glided to the bedside; 'and the carriage is to come round for you in half an hour.'

'But I can't leave him, Hannah; look how flushed he is.'

'No, Mamma can't go,' murmured Bertie, dreamily; 'I can't let Mamma go to-night.' And as he spoke the clasp round her neck relaxed, the little head drooped upon her shoulder, the lids fell over the fever-lit eyes, and the child slept in his mother's arms.

'He's asleep, Hannah,' whispered Cecile.

'Yes, my lady; put him down gently on the bed, and leave me to take charge of him till such times as you get back. He won't

wake now for a couple of hours or more, I'll warrant.'

Cecile slipped her child back into his bed, and laid her lips lightly on his brow. That his breathing was slightly heavy and stertorous struck neither her nor the nurse. A few minutes to repair the slight disarrangement of her *coiffure* that Bertie had occasioned, and she was on her way to Clanronald House.

Bright shone the lamps, and lightly rang out the music through hall, reception-room, and corridor. A large portion of the people that constitute the London world were assembled to assist at the last grand festival of the season. The votaries of Fashion made dance and libation at the last state ceremonial of the goddess. Christmas was yet afar off, and the penances exacted by milliners' bills and lavish opera boxes a Nemesis of the future.

'And how's Bertie, Lady Mallandaine?' said De Vitre, as he encountered her on the

threshold of the principal saloon some few minutes after her arrival.

'By no means well, poor child! Only he fell off to sleep before I left, or I don't think you would have seen me here to-night.'

De Vitre murmured some commonplace regrets at not hearing a better account of the boy. 'Will you take my arm, Lady Mallandaine?' he continued. 'I don't know whether you wish to make your curtsy to our hostess. She only recollects Royalty and the very bluest blood on these occasions. I never presume to intrude on her myself at these times, though she once did me the honour to think me amusing.'

'A compliment,' laughed Cecile, 'that I presume you are unable to return.'

'No; there you are wrong. When I can get the chance of drawing her out, I think there are few people amuse me more. She ought to have lived in the days of Louis Quatorze. Her sentiments are quite those of that epoch. She has never realised that

the House of Lords now has to move with the age; that our nobility had to choose between leading democracy or being swampt by it; and that a large portion of them have had the intelligence to lead the wave, instead of going down in a hopeless attempt to stem the torrent—ten thousand pardons! I ought not to bore you with my political ideas and democratic sentiments.'

'I like to hear you talk,' said Cecile. 'As the wife of a Member, I have to interest myself in such things, recollect.'

'True; I had forgot that. When a constituency elects a married representative, it has a dual representation. Single, certainly, in the House; but socially it polls two strong votes. Women are such thorough partisans they never take up a cause by halves.'

'I don't think, Mr. De Vitre, you have a very good opinion of us generally?' and Cecile looked inquisitively at her companion.

'I won't deny it, Lady Mallandaine; I have been—nay, am—rather a severe judge

of your sex, perhaps. Society is not a very fair field in which to estimate them. Women can be guilty of such meanness and pettiness of action regarding each other in the London arena—the stage upon which I see most of them—that I own to not placing much faith in them.'

'But you should, Mr. De Vitre. I am but young in the world's ways, you will say, but I know it is good for you all to have faith in us. You become worse men, believe me, when you estimate us contemptuously. Because it may have been your fortune to have known some weak and spiteful characters amongst us, don't make the mistake of gauging us all from an indifferent sample.'

'I won't say you are not right; but belief comes hard when faith is once shaken. Ah! here comes Merriott, seeking you, apparently.

> 'Did ye not hear it? No, 'twas but the wind,
> Or the car rattling o'er the stony street;
> On with the dance—let joy be unconfined!'

Alec Merriott came up to them at this

minute, his face wearing a more serious aspect than was the wont of that gay dragoon. 'Lady Mallandaine,' he said, 'I am sent to ask you to come to the tea-room for a minute. Will you accept my escort there?'

'Why, who can want me there?' enquired Cecile, laughing. 'Lia is not here, I know.'

'I think you had better go,' said De Vitre, quietly. His quick eye had already gathered from Merriott's manner that there was something wrong.

'What is it, Captain Merriott?' enquired Cecile eagerly, as she took his arm, with a little nod to De Vitre. 'Am I to see anyone pleasant when I get there, or is this a mere subterfuge to enable you to chant Lia's praises, and enlist me in your behalf?'

'No, Lady Mallandaine,' returned Alec, gravely; 'I would not have brought you there for that. I was sent to fetch you, and know that it is right that you should come.'

A chill ran through Cecile's veins. Already she felt a presentiment of coming evil. Her

thoughts turned rapidly towards her child. 'It's not a message from home for me, is it? Oh, do be quick; how these people do stop up the way! What is it? Do you know? Speak, Captain Merriott; what is it?'

'I can't tell you,' replied Alec, gravely. 'I don't know,' and he turned round, to encounter the face, now pale with terror, that looked appealingly up to him. 'But here we are at last;' and he entered the tea-room.

'Hervey! my God, what has happened?' gasped Cecile, as she was met by her husband on the threshold.

Sir Hervey's stern, haggard face spoke volumes. 'You must come home, Cecile, at once,' he said in a low, hoarse voice.

'Yes, at once. My cloak, quick, Captain Merriott. What of Bertie? Is he worse, Hervey? Of course he is, or you would not have come for me. What do they say? The doctor has been sent for? How wrong and wicked I was to come here to-night! Tell me what is it?'

'Thanks, Merriott,' said Sir Hervey, as he took the opera-cloak from Alec's hands, and threw it over his wife's shoulders. 'Come away quick now, Cecile. Whether you are to see poor dear Bertie alive again or no is now a question of minutes.'

'Don't say so, Hervey, please don't,' whispered Cecile with streaming eyes, as she crept close to him in the carriage. Is there no hope?'

'My darling,' replied her husband, 'it would be wrong to trifle with you now. Nerve yourself to bear the shock as you best may;' and as he spoke he gathered his girlish wife in his arms. 'Poor Bertie's case was hopeless when I came to fetch you. If you see him once more alive, it is all you can ever hope for. Recollect, Cecile, I loved him as much as you, though I'm not perhaps so demonstrative. Let us bear our burden together, my wife. Sympathy lightens these trials, bitter though they must be.'

'You're very good,' murmured Cecile.

'You ought to hate me—a mother who could leave her child as I have done, and Bertie asked me—asked me to—to stay with him to-night;' and here a torrent of tears choked her utterance. 'I shall never forgive myself—never!' she exclaimed, faintly, as the carriage pulled up at their own door.

CHAPTER XV.

'DEATH OF BERTIE.'

THE carriage stops. No need to ring: the butler is standing on the steps, with the door open behind him. He murmurs a confidential reply to the curt interrogatory Sir Hervey put to him as he supports his young wife up the steps. No; all is not over so far. The angel of death hovers o'er the house with unlifted hand, but has as yet forborne to strike. The servants haunt the staircase, with that mingled expression of curiosity and terror that their faces mostly assume when grief or death menace the establishment of which they are a part.

'Courage, Cecile!' whispers Sir Hervey; 'Bertie is still alive, scant hope though there may be.'

Her limbs tremble under her as she hurries up the staircase, clutching the balustrade tightly and nervously in her passage. She pauses for a moment at the door of the room, then with a supreme effort pushes it open and steps in.

Standing by the mantelpiece is the doctor, his eye carefully watching the clock, from which it occasionally wanders to a minim-glass or his patient. Poor Bertie is tossing restlessly in Hannah's arms, rolling his poor little fever-split head incessantly. The flushed face, the delirium-lit eye, made Cecile's heart stand still; but a quick, low remark from Hannah recalled her to herself.

'Please don't give way, my lady Do keep firm, for the child's sake and your own. He don't know what he's saying, poor lamb! but he calls for you incessantly. Dare you take him?'

'Yes,' said Cecile; 'give him to me. Bertie, darling, did you think Mamma never would come?' And taking the child in her

arms, she seated herself in the arm-chair that Hannah vacated.

'Down—down! I don't like the water; I shall never get out! Mamma! where is Mamma? why don't you come to Bertie? So naughty of you not to come when Bertie's so frightened. Oh, I'm so cold! wrap me up, please. Go 'way, Lia; I don't love you—you let me fall in. Oh, why don't Mamma come?'

'Mamma's here, darling,' murmured Cecile, as she pressed her lips to the boy's burning brow.

'No, Hannah, I didn't,' muttered Bertie, as he tossed restlessly in her arms. 'I never touched it—it was broke when I came in.'

Some childish trouble or peccadillo haunts the restless brain.

'Lady Mallandaine,' said the doctor, in a low voice, 'you must make him swallow this. I am giving him stimulants every half hour.'

'Is there any hope?' asked Cecile, eagerly.

'He is in very great danger, but there's

always a chance while there's life in fever cases.'

'No, no, I can't; it's so hot,' moaned the child; 'I don't want it;' and the fever-dried hands strove to push the cup back from the parched lips. It was with difficulty that they succeeded in making him swallow a portion of the medicine.

'Mamma, Mamma,' he continued, querulously, 'where are you? Bertie's so ill! why are you not here?'

With cheeks pale as death and streaming eyes, Cecile rocked her darling in her arms. For the second time in her young life she was realising a great sorrow. Her mother's death had seemed hard to bear, but now she was going through, though she knew it not, the mere prelude to unutterable woe.

A hushed step on the landing, and her husband glided into the room. He cast a mute look of interrogation at the doctor, who replied by an almost imperceptible shake of the head.

'I have come,' he whispered, 'to bear with you my share of affliction, Cecile. Providence seems dealing hard with us. We can but say, God's will be done!'

She stared vacantly at him, and made no reply. There she sat in all the gaiety of her ball dress—the flowers still wreathed in her fair hair, the diamonds still glittering round her throat and in her ears. Could the revellers at Clanronald House have seen her now, fitter sermon had never been preached on the world and its vanities.

Bertie has dozed off into a fitful, fever-haunted sleep, from which at times he starts with incoherent babble. The candles burn with that cold, peculiar light that heralds the coming day. From time to time the doctor leans over the boy, scans him narrowly, or puts a finger on his pulse. Sir Hervey sits silent and motionless, save when, after the doctor's slight examination, he raises his eyes mutely. Always the same silent negative.

Cecile, too, raises her tear-stained face on such occasions, but with a slight shiver lets fall her eyes without even waiting for that slight shake of the head. She can read her boy's death-warrant in his face.

The London life seems hushed. Slowly and solemnly at intervals the church clocks boom out the hour, and four metallic strokes from a neighbouring steeple announce that another day has dawned over the big city—a hot, sulphureous day, such as London encounters in July—still Cecile gathers her boy in her arms, still Sir Hervey sits motionless, while the doctor and Hannah silently await the end.

Suddenly Bertie, with a start, awakes from his troubled sleep. He gazes about wildly for a second, then, as he looks up at Cecile, he exclaims, 'Mamma, dear, I know you now! Kiss Bertie, for Bertie is going away! I want Papa!'

The tears fell fast from Cecile's eyes on the boy's face, as she pressed her lips to his, and

glittered, too, in those of her husband, as he bent over the child.

'I am going away, Papa. Give my love to Lia, and take care of poor Mamma. I have been so ill, but I am quite easy now. Good bye, Mamma;' and as he spoke the boy raised his head to meet his mother's answering kiss; but ere their lips met, the little head fell back upon her breast, a slight shiver convulsed his frame, and Bertie's course was run.

Sir Hervey clasps her hands as the doctor gently takes the dead child from her embrace. He leads her away, and she follows docile as if in a dream. The tears have ceased to flow, and Cecile feels as if her very eye-balls were seared. She yields mechanically while her own maid and Hannah put her to bed. She is stunned by the blow. She is dimly conscious that a terrible grief has overtaken her. She grasps feebly at the idea that she has been guilty of an atrocious crime.

The doctor, the next morning, when he sees her, is somewhat perturbed at her state.

'Lady Mallandaine, Sir Hervey, is of a very sensitive and imaginative disposition,' he observed. 'This shock has been very great to her, and quite too much in some respects for her mind.'

'Good God!' said the baronet, 'you don't mean that I'm called upon to bear this too? You can't mean that my wife's mind has given way under our affliction?'

'Certainly not; but Lady Mallandaine, in the first agony of her grief, is labouring under a very painful hallucination, which requires some little tact, care, and attention to dispel. I have no doubt of her mind very shortly recovering its balance, but it indubitably is in danger on one point at present.'

'And that is?' enquired the baronet, anxiously.

'The death of her child. It's difficult to get her to say much just now, in the morbid state of mind she's lapsed into; but I can see distinctly that she accuses herself of being the cause of his death. She thinks that had

she stayed by his side, instead of going out last night, he might have been saved. She is reproaching herself bitterly on this point; and the more she broods over it, the worse it will be for her. See her yourself, and make her talk about her boy's death, and combat this view of it. Send for the most intimate female friend she has, and give her similar instructions. Better keep the wound green than let it scar over such an ulcer as that. I need scarcely add that the poor child died from acute inflammation of the lungs, and that it was beyond human skill or attention to arrest what Providence had decreed.'

On this hint, Sir Hervey wrote a few lines to Lia Remington, and Lia was on her way to Eaton Square as quickly as wheels could carry her. The baronet's note was the first intimation that she received of the desolation that had befallen him, and Lia was inexpressibly shocked and grieved at the intelligence. To think that the bright sunshiny boy of whom she was so fond, and

who, on his side, was so fond of her, was gone—that she was never to see more of him than—

> 'that chill, changeless brow,
> Where cold obstruction's apathy
> Appals the gazing mourner's heart—'

brought hot tears from Lia's eyes. Sadly, too, she thought of Cecile. How she was bound up in poor Bertie, Lia knew only too well. She pictured also the blow it must be for Sir Hervey, for, though an undemonstrative man, Lia was quite aware what a deep love he had cherished for his boy. And all so sudden, too, she thought. What a crash of all his proud hopes and aspirations for his heir! and then she called to mind numberless little instances that had indicated what pride the baronet had taken in the poor dead child, whom he had so fondly hoped would one day stand in his place.

At length she arrived at the Mallandaines' house, and was shown into Sir Hervey's own room.

'I knew you would come, Lia, to our help in our sore affliction,' he said, as he met her and took her hand. 'The blow has come upon us like a thunderbolt. For myself, I am sore stricken, but can bear it. Heavy as the stroke is, I bow to it and trust that an all-wise Ruler knows best what is good for us. But Cecile, poor child, is distraught. We can do nothing with her. She accuses herself of being the cause of poor Bertie's death, and is past my reasoning with.'

'Oh, Sir Hervey, I am so sorry for you both. I am so grieved myself about poor darling Bertie. What can I do? only tell me;' and the tears rained fast down from Miss Remington's bright eyes as she spoke.

'There's much for you to do, Lia. You must combat this hallucination of Cecile's. If she shrinks from speaking of it, do you open the question. The doctor says it is imperative, if possible, to disabuse her mind

on this point, and that we had better wound her feelings now than let her morbidly brood on that idea.'

'I see. I will do my best, though I only feel fit just now to sob my heart out. Will she see me, do you think?'

'We'll not give her the chance to say "No." Come along. Thanks, Lia,' muttered the baronet, as he opened the door of Lady Mallandaine's room. 'I knew you would not fail us in our need.'

Miss Remington paused for a moment on the threshold and gazed around. Cecile was crouched in a small chair on the hearth-rug, staring vacantly into the empty grate. She did not even raise her head at the slight noise made by the opening door.

In another second Lia had dashed across the room, bound her arms round her, and exclaimed, 'Oh, Cecile, my darling!'

Lady Mallandaine struggled for a few seconds to extricate herself from the embrace, but Lia held too tightly, and in less

than a minute was sobbing on her shoulder as if her heart would break.

With dry stony eyes Cecile contemplated her for a little, and then, endeavouring to push her back, exclaimed—

'Go away, Lia. Ah! you cry for him. Hush, don't touch me, Lia. You don't want to stain yourself by contact with his murderess, do you? Go!'

'I won't. I loved him as well as you did. How dare you say such shocking things of yourself? Cecile, my darling, my sister in all but name, if your place was by his bedside, was not mine also? Think, dearest, that when you accuse yourself you accuse me. We have lost him, mine own. No effort on our part could have saved him; but, for his memory and that of our old friendship, I claim my right to weep for him with his mother;' and here her tears choked Lia's utterance, though she relaxed the embrace in which she held her companion not one iota.

For a few seconds there was silence between those two, and then, in tremulous tones, Cecile whispered, 'Lia, can you honestly—don't you think—I mean, do you hold me blameless?

'Yes, dearest. Hervey and I know well you would have died yourself to save that poor little life. Nothing, the doctors say, could have been done for him; but, Cecile, you have a husband as stricken as yourself. You've a sister, myself, who feels this deeply as you do. Won't you mourn with us? You have no right to seek isolation from the fellow-sharers of your bereavement.'

'Oh, Lia, Lia! I'm so miserable. I can but think if I had remained at his bedside, as I should, it might have been different,' and at last Cecile mingled her tears with her friend's.

'But don't you think,' she continued, after a little, 'Hervey thinks so?'

'No, no, no!—never! For heaven's sake, Cecile, disabuse your mind of that idea.

Worse poison you never can take;' and Lia looked anxiously up into her friend's face.

But Lady Mallandaine shook her head mournfully, and made no reply.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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